

... and when you can't crawl ...

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... and when you can't crawl ...

by [JolinarJackson](#), [ShoyzzArt](#)

Summary

In the aftermath of the Vulture and May finding out about Spider-Man, Peter should be happy. May is allowing him to continue his patrols and Tony is making good on his promise to mentor him.

Peter is anything but fine, though. Struggling with nightmares and his insecurities, Peter's life begins to unravel for good when he becomes the target of a violent school bully, and his only refuge in his duties as Spider-Man is destroyed following a tragic failure.

Tony and May, trying to figure out the dynamics of raising a teenage superhero between the two of them, are forced to watch from the sidelines as Peter refuses to accept help out of fear of appearing weak ... and reaches his breaking point.

Notes

Art: The wonderful art for this Big Bang story (one cover and two drawings) were created by Shoyzz and are embedded in chapters 1, 7 and 13.

It was so much fun working with you!

[Go here to have a look at the art and leave a comment for her!](#)

Spoilers: Spider-Man - Homecoming, The Avengers - Age of Ultron

Setting: after Spider-Man - Homecoming

Warnings: Implied/referenced suicide, panic attacks, bullying, violence, implied/referenced depression, homophobic language, language

Author's Note: Written for the Peter & Tony Big Bang and based on the following prompt made there: "Peter is being bullied by Flash and his buddies. He is embarrassed that he's a superhero and is still bullied. So he tries to hide it from Tony. Tony figures it out. Maybe make it a slow realization like Tony starts piecing everything together. Focus on how Spider-Man is brave and tough but Peter Parker is the opposite. Tony teaches Peter that he and Spider-Man are one in the same." I went a bit further than that, obviously. This thing wouldn't stop growing. I still hope that this is what you wanted.

Beta: Kazoom, who did the best job ever in cheering me on, answering countless questions, offering ideas and reading everything I sent her way.

Chapter 1



*“When you can't run, you crawl. And when you can't crawl, when you can't do that ...”
“... you find someone to carry you.”*

*Tracey Smith & Zoë Washburne
(Firefly)*

Chapter 1

Peter Parker was nothing without the Spider-Man suit.

He'd known that even before Mr. Stark had given him one of the most advanced and, quite frankly, coolest pieces of technology currently in existence on planet Earth. Actually, he'd realized it just after he'd started going out in a self-made, horrid blue-red tracksuit combination. Looking at his getup in a mirror the first time had made his eyes hurt and building the web-shooters had cost him three months worth of his allowance, but everything had just ... faded away whenever he'd pulled the mask over his face. It wasn't just because of the noise and the lights becoming muffled and softer, easier to bear. It was also because with that mask on – with nobody being able to see him, recognize him, *judge* him – he wasn't Peter Parker anymore.

He was Spider-Man.

And Spider-Man was *different*. He was everything Peter Parker *wanted* to be.

He was strong and he was witty and he always knew what to do or what to say. He could fight, if necessary. He could stop SUVs from crashing into buses, leave muggers webbed up for the police to find and get a family safely out of a house fire.

Spider-Man had survived a plane crash and he'd taken down his very own supervillain.

Spider-Man had been given a suit by *Tony Stark*. He was in contact with an actual *Avenger*.

Those things were all out of reach for someone like Peter Parker. The reason for that was as simple as it was sad, really: Peter Parker was a loser.

Peter startled when the stack of books he'd been trying to cram into his locker was knocked out of hands, scattering on the floor of the busy school hallway accompanied by Flash Thompson's usual

greeting of “Hey, Penis”.

Peter's shoulders sank and he took a deep breath, raising his head. Sure enough, Flash was grinning at him with his arms crossed over his chest. The fact that he wasn't alone, though, was the real reason Peter cringed. Next to him, Quentin O'Donnell was leaning against the row of lockers casually, a smug smile on his face. Quentin had joined Midtown High at the beginning of the year, maybe a week before Homecoming. Him and Flash had become close to inseparable since they'd been assigned to be lab partners a couple of weeks ago and since then, they'd discovered more than just their fathers' money to bond over.

Peter didn't bother with a reply. Even if he had known what exactly to say that wouldn't make the situation even worse, frustration and instinctive fear were choking him, pressing against his chest until it felt like he couldn't breathe. The feeling was a familiar one. Peter hadn't been a stranger to bullies when he'd started out at Midtown High. The last two years of junior high had been hell already. Brent Johnson had been waiting at seemingly every corner to hate everything about Peter, starting with his intelligence and ending with his being an orphan.

And it hadn't just been name-calling, either.

Unlike Flash, Brent had liked to drag Peter into bathrooms and closets to drive his point home with his fists.

It wasn't that Peter hadn't *tried* to fight back. He had done just that when Brent had started bullying him, but Peter had always been a little behind physically – shorter and scrawnier and weaker than other boys his age – and he'd soon discovered that letting Brent do whatever he wanted actually resulted in him leaving Peter alone for the day much sooner.

Quentin reminded Peter of Brent: tall, muscular, his green eyes looking at Peter as if he was the most pitiful person he'd ever seen. Even though Peter was by now far from defenseless, the old feelings of being inadequate and alone returned whenever Quentin gave one of his sharp, mocking grins.

Crouching to pick up his books, Peter didn't see Quentin step closer, but he *felt* it, almost as if he could sense the air currents shifting with the movement. His body reacted automatically, muscles tensing, ready to duck out of the way, turn and fight ... but Peter clamped down on it as the books he'd managed to recover were kicked out of his hands again.

Some students hurrying past sidestepped out of the way, giving the situation short, disinterested glances before walking on.

“Quentin,” Flash said, his voice dripping with a fake reprimand, “look what you've done.”

When Peter glanced at him, he could see that he was still smiling. Flash had disliked Peter from the moment they had gone toe-to-toe during freshmen year for the last remaining spot on the Academic Decathlon team. Peter had won easily, relegating Flash to first alternate. Only during the following weeks, Peter had come to realize that for Flash, this had somehow started a rivalry which wasn't just restricted to the classroom.

It wasn't long before he'd started to lash out verbally against Peter whenever he could and he had the uncanny talent to find every little chink in Peter's armor, his words sliding through with precision and without warning, starting with harmless jabs about his cheap clothes and working his way through Peter's inability to be good at sports and his love for science fiction before trying out various embarrassing variations of Peter's name. For whatever reason, he'd settled on 'Penis Parker' rather quickly.

The only thing worse than Flash saying all these things, however, was that Peter found himself tongue-tied and unable to react whenever it happened, the fear and helplessness Brent had beaten into him rising to the surface to keep a tight hold on his self-confidence. This hadn't changed even after he'd gained the powers. Unfortunately, they didn't make Peter any less awkward and they didn't erase habits and fears that by now seemed carved into his subconscious.

The worst thing was how tantalizingly easy it would be to just let Spider-Man take the reign, show them real strength ... but he couldn't. Nobody was supposed to know that Peter was the face behind the mask. Even the few people who knew – May, Ned and some of the Avengers – were too many already.

So Peter did the only thing he could do. He started to gather up his books yet *again*, his lips pressed together and his grip tight. Quentin's hand reached down to ruffle his hair teasingly and Peter reared back, daring a glare in Quentin's direction that only made him laugh. "You're right," he told Flash. "He *does* look like a kicked puppy when he's angry."

Peter's hands were shaking and he tried to hide it by pressing the books to his chest tightly. Flash laughed and then moved on, Quentin following in his wake. As he passed Peter, he pushed against his shoulder, causing Peter to overbalance and sprawl on the floor.

"Loser," he said.

Peter just sat there for a moment, waiting for them to vanish among the students milling around the hallway, before he gathered his books for the final time and slammed them into his locker angrily. He paused, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. When he picked up his backpack, he pushed his hand down to the very bottom, his fingers clenching around the cool, rough material of the suit for a moment.

'It's fine. Just take it. It will get better.'

He ignored the cynical part of him that reminded him he'd thought the same way two years ago, while he'd pressed wet hand towels against a blooming bruise on his cheek.

"There's no way," the blonde said, shaking her head insistently and pointing her fork at the brunette sitting opposite her. "Are you seriously thinking that *Spider-Man* is going to this school?"

Her brunette friend shrugged. "He was in Washington to save the decathlon team, wasn't he? Hell of a coincidence."

Peter winced, knowing that springing into action in his suit during the trip had helped to start some pretty wild rumors at his school about Spider-Man's identity. Spider-Man was a Queens neighborhood hero, after all. His sudden appearance in Washington was hard to explain away.

He glanced at both the girls quickly, barely able to see them with the amount of students coming and going in the busy canteen. He'd tuned into their conversation when he'd picked up on the word 'Spider-Man' while walking past them with his tray. Now, sitting several tables away and over the noise of the school's lunch break, he had to really focus to make out what they were saying, but he considered it practice to hone his abilities.

The blonde scoffed. "So, not only would he go to this school, he'd be one of the decathlon team? Have you looked at those guys? None of them would be able to pull it off."

"He's doing a Clark Kent, obviously."

"Yeah, right." The blonde paused and then said, "Christ, look at Lisa Greene. Would it hurt to show a bit of skin?"

"Or to wear some make-up. Such a loser."

A tray was set down opposite Peter's and he was drawn from listening to them, looking up as Ned settled down. "What are you gonna do?" he asked.

Peter closed the book he'd been pretending to read and frowned quizzically. "'bout what?"

Ned shifted his peas to mix them with the potato mash. "Don't you read the news?"

Peter stared at him and slowly asked, "Do *you*?" That would be something he *didn't* know about Ned.

"The ones that matter." Ned dropped his fork to show Peter the display of his cellphone.

The first thing Peter noticed was the headline '*Spider-Man: The Queens Menace*', then he identified the website as the one of the *Daily Bugle* and shrugged, turning back to his lunch. "Oh ... yeah, they kinda hate Spider-Man."

"Dude," Ned said, his dark eyes wide with indignation, "you gotta do something."

"Like what?"

"They're giving you a bad rep, just swing in there and-"

"Sh!" Peter interrupted him, alarmed. "Keep it down." He tilted his head towards the other end of their table, where MJ had taken a seat, reading an Ibsen drama while shoveling potato mash and sausages into her mouth with single-minded determination. She seemed busy and as if she wasn't paying any attention to them, but Peter and Ned had noticed over time that she was quite good at eavesdropping and she somehow always ended up hanging out around them. It was a bit strange. Especially since she'd let them know just a couple of weeks ago that she considered them her friends.

Ned lowered his voice. "They did a poll. And, like, 46% agree that yo ... that *Spidey* is dangerous."

Peter grabbed the phone out of his hand. "What? No way." He stared at the poll and sighed in resignation.

"We should do something," Ned repeated. "Write a letter. Collect signatures. Protest against what they're saying."

Peter handed the phone back. "Just ignore them. It'll blow over." Ned didn't look happy about that, but Peter shrugged. He lowered his voice as he explained, "Mr. Stark said this could happen. They did the same to him. And you know what kind of things they're writing about Daredevil."

"Yeah, but Daredevil's badass. He, like, really *hurts* people. You're ..."

Ned paused and then suddenly turned his attention to his lunch.

Peter frowned at him. "I'm what?"

Ned sighed and rolled his eyes. "Don't take this personally, but Daredevil's R-rated and Spider-Man's kinda ... PG."

"Dude," Peter said, offended.

Ned shrugged. "Sorry."

"He's just ... friendly." Peter winced. "Yeah, okay. Point taken."

"It's not a bad thing," Ned said quickly. "He *did* take down the Vulture."

Peter lowered his gaze to his food, shifting uncomfortably. Taking down Adrian Toomes had been necessary, as sad as it made him feel whenever he thought about what it had done to Liz and her family. It wasn't only his conflicted feelings about exposing Liz's father as a criminal that made his heart skip a beat and his stomach clench whenever he thought about it, though.

Sometimes, he woke up feeling as if concrete was pressing down on his chest, taking away his ability to breathe properly. Sometimes, his shoulder emitted a stabbing pain where the Vulture's talon had dug deep into the flesh. Sometimes, he could still taste sand, blood and ash in his mouth.

He hadn't mentioned all this to Ned and he never would. He looked at Peter being Spider-Man with such unbridled enthusiasm and support ... Peter couldn't take that away from him by letting him know there were severe downsides. Ned had been willing to carry so much of Peter's baggage since they'd known each other, he'd been there through Brent, Ben's death, Peter's helplessness in the face of May's depression ... Peter couldn't ask him to listen to how bad the nightmares were, how he would hear the train approach sometimes and flinch, his palms becoming sweaty and his heart rate increasing, because the rumbling noise reminded him of a building collapsing around him, *onto* him ... he couldn't.

Not yet.

"Besides," Ned added, "not everyone can claim to have been invited to join the Avengers."

"Not everyone can claim that they turned the invitation down," Peter replied. Sometimes, he wondered whether he'd made the right decision, but the moment the initial joy and pride about being asked had faded, the moment Mr. Stark had mentioned moving away from Queens and into the compound, Peter Parker had overruled Spider-Man. Away from Queens, away from Midtown High, away from Ned, from May ... fear and doubt had clamped down on his enthusiasm and in the end, he'd said no. Even then, he'd known it had been the right decision, the logical choice.

The safe choice.

Ned shrugged. "You turned the invitation down, so what? They *asked*. That's what counts. And you've got your suit back. I'd consider that a standing invitation."

Not that Peter had had a chance to wear the suit since it had turned up on his bed two weeks ago. May had grounded him for the foreseeable future for "being a vigilante", "lying about being a vigilante" and "getting hurt pulling stupid stunts while being a vigilante". Peter had yet to hear her call him 'Spider-Man'.

He cleared his throat. "I guess. Yeah." He couldn't help but smile a bit. "Maybe it is."

"Hey, dork." Quentin's backpack landed on Peter's table, creasing the page he'd written his Spanish homework on and rattling the table enough to send his pens scattering over the edge. "I need your advice."

Peter looked up at him carefully. He saw Flash settle down at his own table a couple of rows away, looking at them with an expectant grin.

"A-Advice?" he repeated and he could have kicked himself for it just a moment after, because Quentin's smile widened. He'd clearly walked into a trap. His heart rate picked up and he clenched his hands to hide the nervous fidgeting he was prone to under pressure. He felt Ned's concerned eyes on him, the way he leaned just slightly closer to intervene if necessary.

Quentin leaned on Peter's table, looming menacingly. "There's this girl fawning all over me but I'm not into her. Since you're the king of getting girls to hate you, maybe you could give me some pointers."

Peter swallowed, feeling his cheeks heat with embarrassment.

Ned scoffed. "You know, Quentin, that the reason Liz turned you down for Homecoming was because you're such a massive idiot?"

Peter saw Quentin's eyes narrow, his cold, green eyes fixating on Ned. "Keep out of this, fatso, I'm talking to Penis."

"Peter doesn't want to talk to you."

Something in Peter's chest clenched, as it always did when Ned stood up for him. A mixture of shame and relief. His shame had only grown stronger since Ned had discovered that he was Spider-Man, that he could, theoretically, stand up for himself. But Ned had never assumed that Peter's anxiety and fear of bullies had gone away the moment he'd gained super-strength. He was still there to shield him whenever he could. It meant more to Peter than he could ever express.

Quentin glared at Ned. "And he can't tell me that himself?"

Peter swallowed. "Leave me alone," he said softly, averting his eyes as soon as Quentin looked his way again.

Quentin leaned closer, forcing Peter to look up at him if he didn't want to stare at Quentin's chest. "Or what?" His eyes narrowed. "I have honestly no idea what Liz even saw in you. Must've been pity. You're pathetic." He took his backpack, raising his voice so that everyone could hear when he said, "What kind of loser leaves a pretty girl crying on the dance floor?" With that, he turned away, taking the seat next to Flash.

Their teacher entering saved Peter from more pointed comments and he breathed a sigh of relief, his hands busy flattening the crease in his homework to hide them shaking.

"Are you okay?" Ned asked softly.

"Fine," Peter answered. "I'm fine."

Chapter 2

Chapter by [JolinarJackson](#)

Chapter 2

The apartment smelled of tomato sauce when Peter entered and he heard the radio play in the kitchen, May humming along softly.

“Hey!” he called, toeing off his shoes.

“Hey,” May answered. When Peter entered the kitchen, she pulled him in for a kiss to his forehead and then held a spoon up for him to take. “Verdict.”

He tried the sauce while he dropped his backpack by the breakfast nook. “Spicy.”

“Too spicy?” May asked, putting her hands on her hips. She was still wearing her work clothes, the formal business attire creased a bit from the long day and her dark hair forced into an untidy bun.

He thought about that, taking his enhanced senses into account. Flavor had become a whole new experience since the spider bite. While he'd never been able to tell the difference between May's tomato sauce and the one they served at *Da Cimino* down the street, he could now taste the difference of the herbs used. He shook his head. “No, it's fine.”

He set the table while May finished cooking. Dinner was a routine, time spent together to talk about their day. It had stopped abruptly for a while with Ben's death, but so many other things had as well. Peter didn't like to think back to that time and he knew May didn't either. He knew she probably still felt guilty, even though he didn't think she had to. He was just glad that they had found a way to recover, to sit together again and share problems, jokes and advice.

“How was school?” May asked as they settled down to eat.

“Okay,” he answered vaguely. “How was work?”

“Good, actually. I might do a couple of extra hours in the next couple of weeks. Graveyard shift. There's a big case coming up and they don't have enough hands on deck for research, so they asked the secretaries and I volunteered. Is that alright?”

He poked at his pasta. “I don't get why *you* always have to do it.”

May sighed and brushed a loose strand of dark hair behind her ear. “I told my boss I need the extra money, so she asked me.”

Peter swallowed at the implications, a tight knot of anxiety settling in his chest. “You said we don't have a problem, now that we moved.”

They'd swapped apartments with the neighbors across the hallway a few months ago. Without Ben, their former place had grown to be too expensive. The additional room that had doubled as a guest room and a storage space for Peter's dumpster diving exploits had become not affordable anymore. Luckily, the couple across the hall was expecting a second baby and they'd gladly swapped apartments to use the guest room as a nursery.

For Peter and May, this new apartment had enough space, both of them still having their own

rooms, though a little smaller than before. Peter had solved his space problem by getting a bunk bed off the neighbors on the first floor for just fifty bucks and used the top bunk as a storage place. It wasn't ideal and it was far from what they'd had before, but at least they were still living in their neighborhood.

The thing hurting more than losing the space was losing the place holding so many memories of Ben.

"We don't have a problem," May confirmed, smiling reassuringly. "Not with those extra hours."

Peter shook his head. "I should get a job."

"Peter," she replied, her dark eyes earnest, "we talked about this. School is more important."

"But I'm doing good at school. I have time to spare."

"I don't want you to get a job and that's final," she said firmly before her expression softened. "Let's not ... argue."

Silence fell over the table for a while, the radio playing and their cutlery the only sounds, before May cleared her throat. "I noticed that you're taking your suit to school."

Peter nodded hesitantly.

"Do you go out? As a vigilante?"

"Spider-Man," he corrected and poked her shin with his foot in reprimand.

"You're not a man," she replied.

Peter raised his eyebrows. "Well, Spider-Teen doesn't exactly strike fear into the thugs."

"Which is the reason that all the Avengers and vigilantes we know are *adults*."

He pulled a face at her.

May chuckled. "Oh yeah," she said, "*that* pout is really mature."

"I'm not pouting."

She smiled. "You look like a kicked puppy." Her hand reached out over the table and pinched his cheek teasingly. "So adorable."

Peter rolled his eyes at her but his stomach clenched at the reminder of Quentin's words this morning. He didn't feel very hungry anymore all of a sudden.

"I get why you're wearing a mask. Your face doesn't exactly strike fear into thugs, either."

Peter huffed a breath. "Are you done?" He wasn't serious and she knew it. He was relieved they were finally talking about it without shouting or her threatening to punch Mr. Stark into oblivion.

May pointed her fork at him. "Don't think I forgot that I asked you a question."

"I didn't go out," Peter answered. "I just feel like the suit is safer when it's with me."

May looked at him, her dark eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Peter leaned back, done with his dinner. Ignoring May's questioning look at his half-empty plate, he pulled one leg up to his chest, wrapping his arms around the knee. "Promise."

"Okay," she said finally. "In that case ..." She paused and swallowed, as if she had to find the resolve to say what she was about to say. "You're no longer grounded."

Peter's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Like ... really?!"

"Really."

He jumped to his feet, rattling the table in the process, and hurried around to pull May into a fierce hug. "Thank you, May!"

He turned to grab his backpack and leave for his room but May grabbed his wrist. "No, no, no, hold your horses."

He halted, turning around to her with his eyebrows raised in question.

"There's gonna be rules."

He deflated. "*Rules?*"

"Yes." She got up and grasped his shoulders, looking at him earnestly. "If I let you do this, you will follow each of them to the letter. If I catch you ignoring them even once, that suit is gonna be in an express mail envelope to the Avengers Compound faster than you can say 'Tony Stark', are we clear?"

Peter groaned. "But ... *Iron Man* doesn't have to follow rules."

She quirked an eyebrow.

He tried again. "I'm sure *Daredevil* doesn't have to follow rules."

May laughed. "*I'm* sure if Daredevil's mother knows what he's up to, there *are* rules." She took a seat and patted the bench next to her. Peter slumped down to sit. May cleared her throat. "I talked to Tony this morning and he agreed to what I'm about to lay down."

"You talked to him?" He hadn't been allowed to reach out to Mr. Stark since May had seen him in the suit almost two weeks ago. As far as he was aware, Mr. Stark had not tried to reach him, either. The last conversation they'd had was over the phone, after May had seen Peter in the suit, and that talk had been short, quickly interrupted by her anger. She'd talked to Mr. Stark alone and Peter had put his earbuds in so he wouldn't have to listen to them argue about him. When May had come back, she'd told him that he was grounded and that he wasn't allowed to contact Tony Stark for the foreseeable future. Peter had been tempted to disobey more than once, but found himself not actually wanting to. It wasn't just because the punishment would be worse if May would find out some way (and she would, he was certain of that), but he also didn't want to disappoint her.

"Homework comes before Spider-Man. Always. You tell me when you go out. Always."

He nodded. He could live with that.

"Curfew is at eleven on school nights."

Peter gaped at her. "Eleven?!"

"Should I make it ten?"

He sighed and reluctantly shook his head.

"On Fridays and Saturdays, you get until one in the morning. When I say curfew, I mean that you better be inside the apartment at that time or just about to cross the windowsill."

"Fine." He tried to get up but she shook her head and grasped his arm and he sank back down, resigned. "I feel like I should take notes."

May quirked a smile, but quickly became earnest again. "There will be no neglect of your social life, I exert the right to send you to a party, a date, an evening out with friends or a school dance instead of you going out on patrol. You won't ditch any extracurricular activities. The moment your grades go down, you'll be grounded until they go back up."

He bit his lip to stop the protest forming.

"When I text you – and I *will* – I expect you to answer within ten minutes."

That was impossible. "What if I'm in the middle of something? It could take longer."

May looked at him, skeptical. "Does twenty minutes sound alright, then?"

He nodded reluctantly.

She grew even more serious, her expression pinched. "If you don't answer or if you're home late, I'm going to call Tony. If you're in the kind of trouble you can't get out of or injured too badly to be able to make your way home, you're going to call Tony."

"I don't exactly have his number," Peter admitted. "I usually call Happy and-"

"Tony said that your suit's AI is able to reach him directly in case you're in trouble. Apparently, it will also reach out to him when your vitals go havoc, so no faking, no holding back."

Peter felt a pang in his chest at the words. So the suit would still be an instrument to keep an eye on him. He wondered whether Mr. Stark still thought of him as a child and then reluctantly admitted to himself that that was most probably the case.

"If you're okay with all that," May concluded, "you can go."

Peter nodded quickly. "Yeah."

She smiled. "Good. Then go and do your homework."

It was strange to step into the suit after such a long time. It had almost been a month since the Vulture incident, since he'd last worn the suit. When it tightened around him, Peter rolled his shoulders, getting reacquainted with the feeling. He ignored the light sting of pain in his right shoulder, grabbing the mask off his desk instead, and opened his bedroom door.

He paused.

This was new. Instead of avoiding May when wearing the suit, he was actively searching her out

and it felt weird, even though a tendril of relief was also there. He didn't have to hide anymore, didn't have to lie. That had always been one of the worst downsides about Spider-Man: deceiving May after everything she had gone through in the past year.

He stepped into the kitchen and found her on the couch in the living room beyond, sipping wine and reading a magazine. He cleared his throat as he crossed the kitchen and hovered where the tiles met the carpet of the living room. "I'm ... heading out."

May stared at him and he shifted uncomfortably. She shook her head. "God, this is so weird."

Peter breathed a sigh of relief and cracked a smile. "Yeah, it is."

May got up and pulled him into a hug before framing his face with her hands. Her eyes bore into his, a pained expression pulling the corners of her lips down. She looked tired. "What do parents say in these kinds of situations?"

"Not sure." Peter shrugged. "Good luck?"

"Go get them, tiger?"

Peter laughed. It died when he noticed May's eyes welling up with tears. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I ..." She combed her fingers through his hair. "Allowing you to do this goes against everything I ..." She huffed a breath. "It doesn't matter." Her thumbs brushed the skin under his eyes, as if she was wiping tears away, and she let go of him abruptly. "Be safe."

"I will," he promised. He pulled the mask over his face while he walked back to his bedroom, swallowing down the feeling that had settled in his ribcage, squeezing his heart and lungs. It wasn't sadness, exactly ... maybe guilt. He shook his head, trying to rid himself of it. He had no reason to feel guilty. May knew now, everything was out in the open. And she'd get used to it.

He slid open the window as the suit came online. However, he immediately noticed that the suit's capabilities had been limited again. The Training Wheels Protocol was back in place, restricting Peter's options considerably and essentially putting him back into trainee mode. He sighed sadly, but decided that there was nothing he could do about it.

Just as he was about to cross the window sill, though, a voice made him pause.

"Good evening, Peter. How are you?"

"Karen?"

"That is the name you gave me."

Crawling onto the roof, Peter asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I was programmed by Boss to be your personal ABS."

"ABS?"

"Advanced Babysitter System."

"Of course." He stepped onto the ledge of the roof and checked the status of the web fluid canisters. "I thought you're only active once the Training Wheels Protocol is disabled."

"Boss changed my programming slightly after realizing that you enjoy my company."

Peter paused, taken aback.

Karen seemed to pick up on his surprise. *"Is that a correct assessment?"*

Peter ducked his head. "Yeah." He sighed. "I missed you, Karen." While it irked him slightly that Mr. Stark had taken away the advanced functions of the suit, he was relieved that he at least had her.

"I missed you too, Peter."

And even though he was sure that her statement was not caused by anything close to real emotion, it warmed him.

Peter's night wasn't terribly busy. By half past eight, he had helped an elderly man to find his dog, answered three text messages from May and stopped a shoplifter running from the enraged owner. Those kinds of things were pretty standard, low-profile and exactly what he thought May and Mr. Stark would like him to limit himself to.

Interrupting two guys mugging a young couple was a step up, though. Peter didn't get to do this kind of thing often. It made a difference once weapons and criminals ready to actually hurt people came into play. The stakes were higher and Peter was aware that he had to get everything 100% right, because somebody else might suffer the consequences if he didn't.

He was aware that his fighting technique was way behind what counted as professional. He couldn't really help it, he simply lacked the training, and despite what some people said, YouTube wasn't a substitute for a real fighting instructor.

However, up until now, Peter had always managed to gain the upper hand eventually. His enhanced strength, agility and the webs were a big help.

Unfortunately, they weren't always enough.

Peter fell onto his knees and dropped into a seated position, leaning back against the rooftop's raised ledge. Sirens passed by on the street below, likely headed for where the mugging had taken place to arrest the criminals Peter had left webbed to a lamppost. Peter winced, his hand pressing down against his side. "Karen," he said, "status report."

"You've been stabbed," she answered. Her voice sounded gentle, calm and slightly worried. Peter wondered absently whether Mr. Stark had tweaked her to be like this or whether he was just imagining it because he was in pain.

"I didn't dodge fast enough," he replied. "Can you ...?" He swallowed against the pain, feeling blood flow freely over his fingers. "How bad is it?"

"No internal organs were damaged. However, the wound is quite deep and is bleeding profusely. Seeking medical assistance is recommended."

"May will freak." He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to think of a way to at least stop the bleeding, if only until he'd decided what to do about it. A sudden idea sparked and he aimed one of his web-shooters at the wound, covering it in a thick layer of webs.

For a moment, it seemed fine. Then the real pain hit.

Burning, as if somebody had poured acid onto the wound.

He hissed a breath through his teeth and tilted his head back, swallowing down a scream.

"Peter, are you okay?" Karen asked.

"It hurts. It hurts."

"The chemicals the webs are comprised of are not intended to be used on open wounds. I wish you would have consulted me before taking this action."

Peter gasped, his eyes closing as the pain slowly receded. "Be right back," he whispered and took off the mask. The icy winter air felt heavenly against his clammy forehead and heated cheeks, brushing over the pained tears that had escaped. He wiped his face with the sleeve of the suit and looked down at the wound carefully. The webs were covering it entirely and no blood was seeping through. He took that as a good sign.

His phone vibrated against his hip and he took it out of the small pocket hidden there to look.

Checking in, May had written.

Peter sighed. *I'm ok*, he typed back. It wasn't even a lie, he told himself as he put the phone back into the pocket and slid on the mask. He wasn't bleeding anymore and he was conscious. It didn't constitute as 'fine', but 'okay' would do.

"What's the damage to the suit, Karen?" he asked.

"All systems online. However, I recommend to have the suit mended."

Peter nodded slowly. "Right." He got up and stepped onto the ledge, looking towards Manhattan and Avengers Tower glittering in the night. Peter wasn't far from Queensboro Bridge and the steel construction of the upper roadway was perfect for running, jumping and web-slinging. He could make it to Manhattan in no time. "Is Mr. Stark in today, Karen?"

"Boss resides in his Manhattan penthouse as we speak," Karen answered.

A penthouse, right. Avengers Tower was for sale. Peter shifted his eyes away from tower and towards the bridge. "Can you let him know that I'm on my way?"

"No problem."

Peter checked the wound once more before he started to make his way to the bridge. Vernon Boulevard was the shortest way, but had mostly low buildings and not many points he could attach his webs to to swing properly, so Peter used rooftops, bridging large distances between houses by jumping onto and off street lights and trees. Once he reached one of the bridge's stone pillars, he crawled all the way to the upper deck and higher, smiling at the sight of the bridge in front of him as it stretched over the river towards the glittering skyline. Cars were still crawling towards and from Manhattan on the two decks below him but he didn't have to pay them any mind. "Karen, would you plot a course ..."

He trailed off when he noticed a lone figure on the footpath next to the lower deck, fingers entwined with the chain-link fence separating them from Queensbridge Park stretching out at the shore below. As Peter watched, they turned away from the sight and Peter's lenses were able to zoom in on their face. It was a girl, around Peter's age or maybe a bit older. She wiped tears off her cheeks and crossed her arms over the thin jacket she was wearing, her short blond hair ruffled by

the wind and her cheeks reddened by the cold.

“Abort, Karen,” Peter said. He shot a web at a steel beam looming up above him and used it to lower himself onto the footpath, making sure he landed with enough distance to the girl that she wouldn't get scared by his sudden appearance. “Hey,” he said, holding his hands up to show that he didn't mean any harm.

She stopped, her blue eyes going wide in surprise.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She wiped her cheeks and shrugged. “Why are you asking?”

Peter was taken aback for a moment, not expecting the question when it seemed *so obvious*, then he said the first thing that came to his mind. “Cause I wanna know.”

Her pretty face set into a frown and she huffed a breath. “I'm fine.” She walked past him, back towards Queens.

Catching up, Peter fell into step beside her. “You're not, though.”

She stopped and looked at him, her eyebrows raised questioningly.

“You're crying,” he stated the obvious.

A bitter laugh escaped her. “Yeah, that's what happens when you have a crappy night.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

She shrugged and continued to walk, shooting Peter an irritated glare when he kept walking alongside her. “What are you doing?”

“Walking you home. Or to the next bus stop.”

She scoffed.

“Cab?” Peter asked.

This prompted a laugh from her which didn't sound as bitter as the one before. “I'm gonna be fine, Mr. Hero,” she said. “You carry on saving people who actually need it.”

“Hey,” Peter said as she started to walk again, “what's your name?”

She stopped and turned back around, a challenge in her eyes. “What's yours?”

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and left him standing. Peter sighed, deciding to give up. At least officially. He started to climb the bridge's structure, keeping an eye on her as she made her way off the bridge. He followed her to Queensboro Plaza and watched her until she'd entered the train. Only then did he turn away. This hadn't been the first time somebody had turned down his offer to accompany them to wherever they were headed, but up until now, he'd always been able to convince them otherwise. He guessed there was a first time for everything.

He checked his watch and brushed his fingers over the webbing on his side. It was holding, no blood seeping through. For a moment, he was undecided, torn between patrolling and seeing Mr. Stark about the suit. If nothing else, the girl had shown him that there were people who might need him right now. However, it was clear that the suit needed mending. He should get it done now

before the tear in the material probably worsened. “Karen?”

”*Yes, Peter?*”

”Plot a course to Mr. Stark's penthouse.”

Chapter 3

Chapter by [JolinarJackson](#)

Chapter 3

The penthouse turned out to be on the top floor of a ten-story building just two streets away from where Queensboro Bridge met Tramway Plaza. From the outside, the building had a sleek look, as if it was entirely held together by windows and steel. As Peter paused on the Queensboro Bridge to take it in, he noticed that while the windows were big and allowed for a lot of natural light within the apartments, he wasn't actually able to see much of what was going on inside, the glass manufactured in a way that allowed for complete privacy. All apartments had extensive balconies attached, while the penthouse had a roof garden that took up half of the floor and on which a gazebo was being kept company by a whirlpool and a bar. The building was surrounded by a well-kept lawn over what seemed to be an underground garage.

Everything looked quite expensive and definitely way out of Peter's league.

Peter shot a web out to make his way over and scaled the side of the building, swinging his legs over the rail of the roof garden. The double door leading into the penthouse opened when Peter approached, but Mr. Stark was nowhere in sight.

Peter stepped inside hesitantly, halting just shy of the doorstep. He was greeted by a large living room, which had walls painted in white, interrupted only by the dark warmth of wood paneling installed at random. Several white carpets were strewn about the dark wooden floor, red couches and armchairs formed two groups at opposite sides of the room. At the far end, by a door leading into what appeared to be the hallway, a bar was situated. At the back, where one of the larger red couches was set up right by some high shelves holding an extensive collection of books, a huge tv was showing a muted car race. The lights were warm and not too bright, reflecting off the windows which were taking up two of the walls with a view of the surrounding city.

Peter felt out of place amidst the luxury and the art displayed on the walls, the shelves and several side tables and instinctively curled into himself, afraid he might knock something valuable over if he didn't pay attention.

"Good evening, Peter," a vaguely familiar, female voice said.

He startled and looked around, but he was alone. The door to the roof garden clicked shut ominously. Cautiously, he answered, "Hi?"

"You haven't met F.R.I.D.A.Y. yet, have you?" Mr. Stark asked, coming through the door next to the bar with a glass of amber liquid in his hand. He was wearing a faded black AC/DC concert t-shirt and the kind of jeans that looked casual, but was without a doubt more expensive than Peter's entire wardrobe. Despite the informal wear, he looked like he had jumped right off the pages of a magazine, his dark hair and goatee in perfect order and his eyes awake and attentive. It was the first time they were seeing each other face-to-face since Peter had turned down Mr. Stark's offer to become an Avenger. Peter had feared that Mr. Stark was maybe a bit angry about being turned down, but he was smiling and looked relaxed.

So Peter gave a tentative smile back. "F.R.I.D.A.Y.?"

"The big sister of your AI, which I've been told you named Karen," Mr. Stark answered.

"I thought she sounded familiar." Peter pulled the mask off, brushing a hand through his ruffled hair and then trying to flatten it in vain. "Hey, Mr. Stark."

He tilted his head, his smile widening. "Hey, kid." He stepped up to Peter, his fingers closing warmly around Peter's shoulder as he led him towards the bar. "Drink?"

"I ..." Peter swallowed, not sure what to say. Not sure whether Mr. Stark was *actually* trying to offer him alcohol.

Mr. Stark chuckled. "I have soft drinks. Root beer, coke, lemonade ... I need to stock up on the juice boxes if you plan on coming around more often."

Peter ignored the jab. "Coke's fine."

"Great." Mr. Stark opened the fridge hidden away underneath the bar and got out two cans. "I'll have one too. Having to be a role model and all that jazz." Grinning sharply at his own joke, he set his glass down by the sink and handed Peter one of the cans. "How've you been?"

"Bored." Peter felt parched and downed half the can in just a few gulps.

Mr. Stark slung an arm around his shoulders as he led him out of the living room.

Peter only caught a short glance at what appeared to be a kitchen at the end of a long hallway, then Mr. Stark was already ushering him down a spiral staircase. Apparently, the penthouse consisted of the top *two* floors. Peter felt even more out of place. He wondered vaguely whether Mr. Stark actually needed this much space.

"However, you prevailed and now you're ready to come back even bigger and better." Mr. Stark paused and took a measuring look at him. "Well, better at least."

Peter rolled his eyes but any comment he might have had about it died in his throat when Mr. Stark pushed him through one of the doors at the bottom of the staircase.

"Wow," he whispered.

The room was the size of the living room upstairs, maybe a bit bigger, and held three workstations completely fitted with computers including see-through screens and diagnostic systems. One wall was taken up by a shelf containing all the tools Peter could ask for, another corner housed a microwave, a sink and a candy and soft drink vending machine.

One of the workstations was taken up by an Iron Man chest plate, with the arc reactor sitting next to it. Another was littered with tools, the project being Adrian Toomes's wings, which were hanging in a contraption from the ceiling. One wing was opened entirely and hooked up to several cables, while the other was closed.

There was an empty space on the right side of the room, but this was actually what caught Peter's interest the most. The hologram displayed there was a colorful schematic of the new Spider-Man suit he'd seen at the Avengers Compound. He could see that several areas were marked yellow, while others were highlighted in red or green, typed notes floating in the air.

Mr. Stark looked at him and smiled. "You like?"

Peter gaped at him. "Mr. Stark ... this so cool. Can I ..." He swallowed nervously. Rationally, he knew that Mr. Stark wouldn't have brought him down here if he *hadn't* intended for Peter to actually look around, but a small part of him was still not entirely sure he was welcome. "Can I

enter?"

Frowning, Mr. Stark asked, "What are you, a vampire?"

Peter approached the hologram cautiously. "This is incredible, Mr. Stark."

He shrugged. "It's alright. The one at the compound is better."

"Better?" Peter echoed. His fingers brushed the schematic of the suit, going right through the hologram. He smiled giddily.

"I could show it to you when you come visit."

His eyes widening, Peter turned around to him. "I'm allowed to *visit*?"

"Of course. You have an ID and everything. You just have to pick it up next time you come around." He grimaced and set the coke can down on one of the workbenches, unopened. "Two IDs actually. One is for Peter Parker, one is for Spider-Man. You'd have to pick them up separately."

Peter was stunned. "I just thought ..." He hesitated. "Because I said no ..."

"What? That you hurt my feelings? You're not the only possible recruit, you know? I've got my eye on loads of enhanced people all around the globe. You just happened to be the closest at the time. We'll find someone else who will say yes."

The words stung, just a little bit, but Peter forced a smile.

"Anyway," Mr. Stark continued, "you said no, but that doesn't mean you're not welcome. You're still wearing a multi-billion dollar suit, you know? You're an investment."

"Oh," Peter said and then quickly added, "By the way, thank you for giving me the suit back, Mr. Stark. I didn't ... expect you to hand it back or any-anything. It's yours, I-I just ... thank you." He cursed his nervous stutter for appearing and felt his cheeks heat in embarrassment, looking away and sipping on the coke quickly to escape Mr. Stark's attentive eyes.

Mr. Stark shrugged and settled on one of the chairs, looking Peter and the schematic up and down critically. When he responded, he sounded as if he was distracted by something. "No biggie. You kind of paid for the thing, you know? If the Vulture *had* gotten away with the plane, that would have cost me more than the suit did. You saved the cargo, so I think we're even."

Peter stared at him, speechless.

"Don't get any ideas," Mr. Stark added. "Just because it's yours doesn't mean you can start fiddling around with it again. You're not in the right kind of league to do that yet, understood?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Stand still, right there. F.R.I.D.A.Y., fitting of Spider Mark 3."

"Yes, boss."

Peter watched with wide eyes as the hologram moved to lay itself over him, until it looked like he had donned the new suit.

"Look at that," Mr. Stark muttered and crossed his arms. "You *did* grow a bit. F.R.I.D.A.Y., take measurements and remind me to update Spider Mark 3."

"Of course."

Seeing Peter's questioning look, Mr. Stark explained, "Mark 3's a bit more sturdy than what you're wearing right now. Yours is pretty much one size fits all, but Mark 3 is an armor. It needs to be fitted in some places when you grow."

"An armor?" Peter asked, raising his eyebrows. "Are we expecting a war?"

Mr. Stark's smile seemed tired. "I hope we won't need it, kid." He cleared his throat. "Now, come over here." He beckoned him closer and Peter obeyed, stopping within reach. "And now raise your arm."

"What?"

"So that I can look at the damage," Mr. Stark said slowly, as if speaking to a child. In his eyes, he probably was.

Peter looked down at the webbing patching his side up and raised his arm slightly.

Mr. Stark took his forearm and pulled him closer before he angled the nearest desk lamp at the webbing. "Is there a *wound* under there?"

Hesitantly, Peter said, "Yeah."

Mr. Stark huffed a breath and raised one eyebrow at him. "Well, in that case, this looks really sanitary."

Peter blushed. "It-It's fine, Mr. Stark."

"Can you dissolve the webs?"

"Yeah, but it's no-"

"Do it."

"Mr. Stark-"

"Peter. Now."

Peter huffed a breath and reached for the belt, sliding the web cartridge out that held the dissolvent he'd recently developed. "I-I mean, Mr. Stark ... if you could just take care of the rip in the suit? I mean, the wound ... it's nothing, Mr. Stark."

"Let me be the judge of that."

Peter broke the cartridge, letting the dissolvent soak into the webbing. It stung when it reached the wound and he hissed a breath in pain, feeling the dissolving webbing and something warm trickle down his flank.

While they waited for all the webbing to dissolve, Mr. Stark got a first-aid kit from under the sink and settled back into the chair with a sigh, pulling up another chair for Peter and angling the desk lamp to his liking again once Peter had taken a seat. He grabbed a carpet knife off the workbench to widen the rip in the suit and looked at the wound critically. "Yeah, that's just peachy, isn't it?"

"I didn't dodge fast enough."

Mr. Stark sighed. "It's deep, but it's not bleeding too badly. It also doesn't look infected." He pressed a piece of gauze over the wound. "Hold that."

Peter obeyed.

"So tell me," Mr. Stark said, frowning at a spray bottle, "how's life?"

He shrugged. "Life's okay. I mean, I only just returned to patrol tonight."

"And?"

Mr. Stark pulled Peter's hand and the gauze away to use the spray bottle on the wound. Peter yelped and reared back, stinging pain shooting up his flank like fire. "Son of a biscuit," he muttered.

Mr. Stark raised one eyebrow at him but didn't comment, instead moving the gauze and Peter's hand back to cover the wound.

Peter caught his breath and then replied, "Well, I ran into a group of muggers, gave directions, found a girl wandering--"

"You're not actually giving me one of your reports now, are you?" Mr. Stark asked.

"I ..." Peter hesitated, frowning quizzically.

Mr. Stark sighed deeply and prepared four strips of medical tape. "I was asking about school, your aunt, normal stuff."

Peter bit his lip. "Oh ... school's okay. May's alright."

Mr. Stark raised an eyebrow, his dark eyes searching Peter's expression.

Peter averted his eyes. There was no reason to tell Mr. Stark about their financial worries. He knew that May wouldn't want him to tell. As for his problems with Quentin, Peter couldn't bring himself to mention it. He'd fought hard to earn enough of Mr. Stark's respect to get the suit back, he wouldn't risk losing that all over again, just like after the ferry incident. Especially not over what was just a few shoves and insults thrown his way.

"Fine," Mr. Stark said, taping gauze over the wound and peering critically at his work. "This will do. And your chances of contracting sepsis are now significantly lower."

Peter smiled weakly. "Thanks, Mr. Stark." He slid off the chair, but a strong grip around his wrist stopped him from moving away.

Mr. Stark's eyes dark were earnest. "I never want to see you web a wound again, understood? Next time, you go home and take care of it immediately. If you ignore a wound, it can lead to infection and infection can lead to death."

Peter swallowed, feeling chastened. "I know."

"I *know* you know. It doesn't hurt to hear it again. Don't take unnecessary risks like that."

"I've got a healing factor."

"It could fail you."

Peter shook his head and turned away, but Mr. Stark's grip tightened.

"Look at me, Peter."

He obeyed hesitantly, his cheeks heating when he realized that Mr. Stark actually looked a bit angry.

"I've been meaning to tell you this any way, because I *know* you didn't walk away from that fight with the Vulture unharmed, did you?"

Peter ducked his head but he didn't answer.

"Did you, Peter?"

"You didn't spend ten dollars a day on lunch this week, did you, Peter?" Ben's grip was gentle, but his voice was firm, the look in his blue eyes determined.

Peter shook his head jerkily, feeling tears gather in his eyes at the shame of having been caught.

"You know that your aunt and I don't appreciate being lied to," Ben said and Peter's eyes flitted over to May who stood behind Ben with her arms crossed over her chest.

He ducked his head. "Sorry."

Ben's hand squeezed his arm and then moved to tip up his chin, meeting his eyes. "So when I ask you now who took the money from you, are you going to tell me truth?"

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Stark sighed. "A wound could become too bad for your healing factor to be able to keep pace. You're not immortal, Peter."

"I ... I know, Mr. Stark."

"What if you get hurt enough that you can't run away from a scene?"

Peter swallowed against the knot in his throat and forced a smile, forced out words he knew would have made Ben smile. "Tell my folks I wanted to do right by them, and that I'm at peace and all."

"Is that supposed to be a joke?" Mr. Stark asked angrily. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

Peter's breath caught in his chest. "No," he said quickly. "No, it's ... it's from an old tv show. Ben used to watch it and ..." Mr. Stark's eyes narrowed and Peter shook his head. "It was stupid, sorry. I'm taking what you say seriously. I do."

Mr. Stark stared at him for a long moment, then he sighed deeply. "Define old."

"2002."

"Yeah, practically ancient." He stood, going over to one of shelves and rummaging through several boxes stashed there. "I'm way too busy to watch tv, you should know that."

Peter smiled tentatively. "Yes."

"I'm serious, though," Mr. Stark said, looking at Peter from over his shoulder. "I need you to be upfront about injuries from now on, agreed?"

Peter nodded quickly, the “Yes, sir” slipping out by habit.

Mr. Stark paused, looking a bit startled, before he opened one of the boxes and threw something at him. Peter caught it, recognizing it as a Spider-Man suit. It looked similar to his, if a bit less refined. Mr. Stark nodded at him. “This is an earlier model. Mark 1. It should be enough until you pick the damaged one up tomorrow.”

Surprised, Peter asked, “Tomorrow already?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

Mr. Stark turned to one of the computers, pulling up notes on the screen and typing away quickly. Peter used the chance to change suits quickly, while Mr. Stark said, “Mark 1 doesn't have Karen installed and also no Baby Monitor Protocol or any of the other ABS functions.”

“Really?” Peter asked, smiling.

“Yeah, I made that one with an adult in mind,” Mr. Stark answered. He turned to look at Peter. “So I want you to go home directly and not pull any stunts, understood?”

“Okay,” Peter answered and emptied the coke before he put on the mask. The system came online immediately, giving him information that the web fluid cartridges were empty. He wasn't overly surprised. The production of web fluid was still entirely in his hands while Mr. Stark merely supplied the cartridges fitting into the web-shooters. He quickly exchanged the empty cartridges with the full ones from his damaged suit. “This is great,” he said. “Thank you, Mr. Stark. I'll come by after school tomorrow.”

“Okay,” he answered, opening one of the windows.

Peter climbed onto the windowsill and gave a two-fingered salute. “See you then, Mr. Stark.”

“Get outta here, Bitsy.”

Peter jumped out the window with a whoop, catching himself on a street light. No ABS. He grinned. That gave him plenty of ideas.

He checked his watch and his face fell. Unfortunately, the only thing he *did* have time for was the way home.

Peter's hand touched the windowsill to his room when the clock struck eleven. He heaved himself inside with a pained grunt, his entire flank feeling as if it was on fire. Swinging home might not have been the best idea, but it had been the only way to still be on time. The wound had started to complain after he'd crossed Queensboro Bridge and it had only gotten worse from there. He guessed it was normal, though, for a fresh wound to protest too much movement.

He was going to be fine. And he would have to convince May of the same thing.

So Peter took a deep breath and only stopped to take off the mask before stepping into the hallway. He found May standing near where the kitchen met the living room, looking at him.

“Cutting it close,” she said. Relief was evident on her face, the grip around the glass of wine

unusually tight.

Peter smiled and moved to the fridge, trying to cover up that his side was hurting him. He was grateful for being able to show up in a suit without visible damage. He knew she would have freaked out. May was always so worried about him, especially since Ben had passed away.

"Busy night?" she asked.

"Super-busy," he said, getting out a carton of Thai food and heating it up in the microwave while he picked a few cookies out of the jar May kept next to the fridge.

She relaxed slowly, her face showing a teasing smile. "Hungry?"

"Starving." His appetite was always bigger after patrol and since he'd only eaten half of his dinner, his stomach had rebelled all the way home. It wasn't like Peter had ever been big on eating. He'd always been small for his age, a bit too light. Ben and May had been concerned about it a few years ago and consulted a doctor, but nothing to worry about had been found. Since the spider bite, he hadn't really gained weight either, but his food intake had changed drastically. He tried to keep it to a minimum, knowing that food cost a lot of money. He didn't want to raid the fridge every day. So he tried small meals, but spread all over the day and it seemed to work. He wasn't constantly hungry anymore as he had been just after the bite. Additionally, May had started to stock up on energy bars since she knew about Peter being Spider-Man and they helped as well, even though he didn't really like the taste.

May dropped a kiss on the back of his head. "Are you okay?"

"Peachy."

She chuckled. "One-word answers it is."

He grinned at her. "Sorry, I'm just really hungry."

"That's alright." She combed her hands through his hair, looking at him as if to reassure herself that he was alright. "I'm turning in."

"Okay, see you tomorrow."

"Night."

He waited for the door to her room to fall shut before he let his expression twist, one hand going to where the wound was hidden underneath the suit. With shaking fingers, he opened the drawer they kept their medication in and took some ibuprofen. He knew he would burn right through it, but half an hour of relief would be enough to fall asleep and by morning, the pain would be better.

He felt guilty for not telling May, for breaking her rules this early into the agreement, but he didn't think that telling her he got stabbed the first night he went back out would go over well.

Next time, he promised himself. The next time something like this happened, he would tell her.

Chapter 4

Chapter by [JolinarJackson](#)

Chapter 4

Peter ran down the school hallway as fast as he could, the wound in his side giving an insistent protesting stab when he rounded a corner a bit too abruptly. He hissed and pressed one hand against it, but continued to run towards the library. He was grateful that the school hallways were much less busy in the afternoon, so he was making good time, but he still had to evade plenty of people and his side throbbed when he collided with a cheerleader hurrying the opposite way.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid," he mumbled in time with his steps and pushed through the library door, barely catching himself against the wall as everyone in the room turned to look at him in surprise.

The elderly, constantly disapproving-looking lady at the front desk frowned at him.

He smiled at her quickly and softly said, "I'm so sorry." Awkwardly straightening his hoodie jacket, he cleared his throat and made his way over to the table the Academic Decathlon team was taking up, sinking into a seat next to Ned. "I'm late," he acknowledged with a sheepish grin at Mr. Harrington and brushed a hand through his hair to flatten it. His fingers caught on something sticky and he suppressed a grimace, pulling the web fluid discretely out and wiping it off against his jeans.

MJ raised one eyebrow, unimpressed. "No shit." She sounded annoyed and Peter thought she had every reason to be. He was late for practice by half an hour. It wouldn't be a problem if his activities as Spider-Man hadn't cut into his time on the decathlon team before.

After he'd received the Spider-Man suit from Mr. Stark for the first time, Peter had barely been able to spend even one minute without wearing it. He'd ditched a few decathlon practices during that time and had quit marching band and the robotics club altogether, much to May's confusion and disappointment. And then there was Washington, where he hadn't even turned up for the USAD National Championship despite practically *begging* to be allowed to come with them. He knew he'd damaged his reputation of being reliable, but he was trying to do better. He was *determined* to do better.

Flash raised his eyebrows at him from across the table. "What kept you? Conference call with Captain America and the Hulk?"

Peter felt his cheeks heat when some of the others started to laugh at the joke and got his binder out, checking the page Ned had open to find their place. Peter had invented the internship at Stark Industries to cover up his activities as Spider-Man. Unfortunately, barely anybody at school seemed to believe him, especially since Flash had started to make jokes about how it couldn't be true that someone like Peter would ever earn something as prestigious as an actual internship at SI, let alone regularly meet up with Tony Stark.

While Peter was still leafing through the pages, MJ said, "Don't bother. We're done with practice for today."

"Oh? But ..." He checked his watch, frowning in confusion. They had half an hour to go.

"We're talking Philadelphia," MJ said.

"Philadelphia?" Peter asked.

Flash snorted. "Big city south of us?"

MJ gave him a reprimanding look before turning the same expression towards Peter.

"Teambuilding trip. I just announced it. Next weekend."

"Next weekend?" Peter asked, a lead weight dropping into his stomach. "How ... how much is this gonna cost?"

"We're using the money we won at nationals."

Relief flooded Peter's body and he nodded. "Okay, great."

"So, as I just said," MJ continued towards everyone, brushing a strand of her curly hair behind her ear, "we're gonna go by bus and ..."

Peter bit his lip and tried not to jump when the wound in his side stabbed harshly. He couldn't stop his hand from going there instinctively, though. Ned noticed and prodded him with his elbow. Peter shook his head. He lifted his hoodie jacket and t-shirt carefully and glanced down, relieved not to see any blood well up from under the bandage. It had almost felt as if the wound had split open again, but apparently, it *felt* worse than it actually *was*.

"... Peter being there," Flash said and Peter blinked upon hearing his name, tuning back into the conversation.

He looked at Flash. "What?"

Flash glared at him. "We won that money at nationals," he said slowly, as if talking to a child, his eyes hard. "I don't remember you being there."

MJ sighed. "What's your point?"

"Why should *he* get to go?" Flash asked.

MJ's brown eyes darkened even further, her pretty face turning stony. "'Cause I say so."

Flash gaped at her. "Because you've got a crush on him, you mean."

MJ stared at him levelly, but she didn't answer.

Mr. Harrington cleared his throat. "Come on now, Flash," he said, "Peter's part of the team."

Scoffing, Flash glared at Peter. "You wouldn't think so, considering he spent the last few months being late for practice, ditching us entirely, then coming back just to score a trip to Washington and ditching us again."

Peter swallowed when everyone turned to look at him. Silence settled over the group, then Sally said, "He's right, actually."

"Yeah," Charles added.

Ned crossed his arms. "What, so you suddenly want him to leave the team?"

Abe shook his head. "You know he's smarter than the rest of us."

"Which gets us nothing if he's never here," Sally snapped.

Cindy glared at her. "Says the person who barely answers any questions."

Flash grinned and leaned back in his chair. "We should vote."

Mr. Harrington raised a hand. "Alright, that's enough. We're not going to vote on the exclusion of a team member. This is still an extracurricular activity."

"A competitive one," Flash said.

MJ shook her head. "We're not voting," she said. Her eyes found Peter's and he felt his cheeks heat again. "He's the best one we've got for science."

Everyone was quiet for a moment, the silence weighing heavily on Peter as he tried not to look anybody in the eye.

"As I was saying," MJ finally spoke, "we're going by bus."

After practice, Peter hung back, waiting until most of the others had left to carefully get up from his chair. The wound had stopped hurting in the meantime, but Peter wasn't going to risk it. His run towards practice had clearly interfered with the healing process. The stab wound in his shoulder, which was the only other experience of that kind he could draw from, had needed quite a while to close up properly as well, and it was *still* hurting him. Apparently, the deep tissue hadn't fully recovered yet. It was quite possible that the Vulture had severed sinews or damaged the muscle.

He hoped that the wound in his side wouldn't turn out to be just as persistent.

"Peter," MJ said, catching his attention. Ned was hovering near him, having waited for him, and Mr. Harrington was just calling out a goodbye as he left. MJ made sure that nobody else from the team was around anymore before she turned hard eyes on him and said, "You need to stop flaking."

Peter swallowed. "I know. I know. Sorry. It won't happen again."

He averted his gaze when she stared at him searchingly. "Get a grip," she said finally, "or I can't keep you on."

Peter nodded as she left, her binder clutched to her chest and her backpack over one shoulder.

Ned breathed out a sigh of relief. "Dude, you can't get kicked off the team. Flash would be unbearable."

Peter shoved the binder into his backpack.

"Your aunt is gonna freak if you get expelled. She's gonna ground you. You know, like," he lowered his voice, "the *other* you."

"I *know*." Peter walked towards the door slowly, picking up a bit of speed when his side remained quiet.

Ned fell into step beside him. "You said you wanted to check on web fluid 4.1 for, like, two seconds before practice. What took you so long?"

"It blew up in my face."

Ned's dark eyes widened, clearly worried. "What happened?"

Peter looked at him levelly, raising his eyebrows. "It blew up in my face," he repeated slowly. "For real. And all over the drawer, the chair and the floor."

"Crap."

"Yeah. I had to dissolve it and clean up." He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to find any residues.

Ned breathed a sigh of relief. "Good thing you figured out how to dissolve it or you'd get in trouble for messing with the chem lab."

"That would be the least of my worries," Peter replied. "Have I got some in my hair?"

Ned didn't get the chance to answer because a voice behind them interrupted. "You know you're only on the team because MJ likes you. You only went to Washington 'cause you're Mr. Harrington's pet and because Liz was into you."

Peter and Ned stopped, turning around to Flash. Quentin was by his side, his hands tucked into his leather jacket. Flash looked angry. Quentin looked almost bored, but then his eyes caught Peter's and he smirked. Peter felt his throat close up, his fingers clenching around the strap of his backpack.

Ned stared at Flash angrily. "And you're only sore because you're just first alternate. What's your point?"

Flash glared at him. "My point is that Penis doesn't deserve to be on that team." He looked at Peter, taking a step towards him. Peter hated himself for stepping back automatically, keeping the distance between them at more than an arm's length. A smile tugged at Flash's lips at the reaction. "You better get lost before being kicked out. Keep some of that barely-there dignity."

Ned's eyes narrowed. "Well, he's not about to be kicked out, so you better get lost."

"Why are *you* always getting involved?" Flash asked. "Let Penis speak for himself. Go get a snack." He looked him up and down pointedly. "Or take a walk to lose some of that weight you've put on."

The jab didn't seem to phase Ned and Peter was once again envious about the unwavering self-confidence he seemed to have in any situation. It was the reason Flash rarely paid him any mind. "So what?" Ned asked.

Quentin snapped, "Get lost, fatso!" He stepped towards Ned and it only took a moment for Peter's instincts to react, because he knew that Ned was self-confident when faced with verbal attacks and he'd defend Peter from any insults Flash would throw his way, but physical threats ... he wasn't good at handling those at all. Neither was Peter. He wasn't supposed to be, at least.

That didn't stop him from stepping into Quentin's way, keeping Ned behind him as he backed up a few steps. He tightened his grasp around the straps of his backpack, mainly to stop himself from lashing out, from falling into a fighting stance. There was a moment of silence as Quentin stared down at him, a little bit of surprise showing in his green eyes. "Something you wanna tell me, Tiny?"

Peter was proud that his voice barely wavered. "Leave him alone."

"Or what?" Quentin pushed him backwards and Peter stumbled, Ned's hands on his shoulders keeping him upright.

His nails dug into the material of the backpack straps.

Quentin smiled. "What will you do?"

He pushed again and followed Peter the two steps he stumbled back.

"Huh?" Another push.

Peter noticed that Ned had stepped away from behind him.

"Come on, Parker." Quentin gave another shove, this one harder.

"Just stop it," Ned said.

Quentin looked at him. "You keep out of this," he said, stepping towards Ned, probably just trying to scare him, but Peter reacted. He pushed back, sending Quentin stumbling into Flash, both of them tumbling to the linoleum of the school's hallway in an uncoordinated pile of limbs.

A group of girls walking by laughed.

"Dude," Ned murmured.

Quentin sat up, his gaze furious.

Peter turned his back on him and grabbed Ned's arm. "Let's go."

They had barely made five steps before Peter's body tensed unexpectedly like a warning, and then there were hands clenched in his hoodie jacket and he was slammed into the lockers, his side screaming in sudden pain. "Don't *ever* do that again," Quentin hissed.

"Hey, leave him alone!" Ned said loudly, probably hoping to catch someone's attention. But the girls were long gone and the hallway to the library was empty.

So Ned grabbed Quentin's arm and tried to pry him off Peter but Quentin shoved him back before his fist grabbed Peter's collar again, lifting him until Peter stood on his toes. "Or you'll regret it."

Flash laughed. "Better be careful, Quentin, Penis is friends with Spider-Man."

"That little faggot in tights?" Quentin asked. He snorted. "As if." Quentin dropped him and slammed a fist into the locker beside Peter's head for good measure before turning away. "Let's go."

Flash followed him, still laughing.

Peter let himself slide to the floor, tears welling in his eyes at the pain in his side.

"Are you okay?" Ned asked, dropping to his knees beside him.

Peter groaned and pressed a hand over his wound. "Got hurt last night and it hasn't healed yet."

"Let me see." Ned was shoving the jacket up.

Peter tried to twist away and gasped in pain. "It's nothing."

"Peter," Ned said softly, his eyes startled. "Peter, it's bleeding."

Chapter 5

Chapter by [JolinarJackson](#)

Chapter 5

“Ouch,” Peter whispered and slapped his hand against the tiles of the bathroom floor with a hiss of pain while the other hand pressed the wad of toilet paper against the wound. “Please, please stop bleeding.” He was sitting on the floor of the last stall in the closest bathroom they'd been able to find, his hoodie jacket on the floor underneath his discarded backpack and his shirt pulled up to get to the wound. The bandage was gone. By the time they'd reached the bathroom, the wound had bled through it.

“Peter,” Ned said, entering the bathroom again and then quickly joining him in the stall before locking the door. He looked pale.

Peter became aware that Ned had never seen him hurt like this before. The hysteria in his dark eyes reminded him of the look he'd seen in the mirror the night he got home after the fight with the Vulture.

He tried to give Ned an encouraging smile and only received a disbelieving look in return. “Are you okay?”

“Fine. Have you got it?”

Ned held out the first-aid kit the school kept in the robotics workshop.

“Perfect,” Peter said and sat up straighter. “Help me out.”

“Man,” Ned replied, “you don't need me to do stitches or anything, right? That's bleeding a lot.”

“Not that much.” His phone vibrated against the tiles in the pocket of his jacket and Peter grabbed it quickly, cursing softly as he saw the message from Happy.

Where are you?

“Crap,” Peter said.

“What's wrong?”

“Apparently, Mr. Stark sent Happy to pick me up and school ended, like, twenty minutes ago. He's gonna kill me.” He unlocked the screen and quickly typed out a message.

Waiting at the library check-out. Three people before me. :(Be there in ten.

He looked at Ned. “No stitches. Bandage and medical tape.”

Ned hesitated. “Dude, I don't know. We should get the school nurse, this looks really bad.”

“No, it doesn't. Believe me, this is minor, just ... come on, I need your help.”

Ned sighed, but he opened the first aid kit and unpacked one of the gauze pads. “I'm not sure this is sanitary.”

"At least I'm not using web fluid," Peter replied. He put the bandage over the wound and waited for Ned to cut pieces off the medical tape.

Ned kept eyeing the bandage critically. "That's gonna scar."

"Yeah, I think so too," Peter said. "My healing factor kind of sucks."

"At least you've got one," Ned answered and started taping the bandage to Peter's skin. "You're gonna look like a real badass, all banged up. Girls dig it."

Peter smiled weakly, his hand shifting out of Ned's way and going up to rub over the scar the Vulture had left him with.

For a moment, he could feel the talon pierce into the flesh of his shoulder, smell fire and smoke, taste the sand in his mouth ...

"Peter," Ned said loudly.

He shook himself. "What?"

"You okay? You zoned out." Ned's eyes widened. "Oh my God, it's the blood loss. Do you need a transfusion?"

"I'm fine." He brushed his fingers over the medical tape to secure it better and pulled his t-shirt down. "Thanks."

It took them another five minutes to clean up and Peter zipped his hoodie jacket up to hide the bloodstained shirt underneath.

"Are you gonna tell Mr. Stark?" Ned asked as they swung by their lockers on their way out.

"No."

"Are you gonna tell your aunt?"

Shrugging into his coat, Peter gave Ned a look. "She'd freak out."

"So you're not gonna tell *anybody*?"

"I told you," Peter said with a weak smile.

"Yeah, because you were bleeding out in a bathroom stall at our school."

"I wasn't bleeding out," Peter said, slamming his locker closed. He checked the time on his phone and quickened his pace, Ned at his side. "I was just ..."

As they turned the corner, somebody ran straight into him and they went down together, Peter's hands reaching out automatically to save the other person from a hard landing. His side protested the fall and he bit his lip to keep it from showing on his face. A blonde girl was staring down at him, a pretty face, wide blue eyes ... he knew her.

It was the girl from the bridge.

He smiled automatically, forgetting for a moment where they were ... *who* he was. "Hey."

She frowned at him and the moment shattered. He realized that his hands were still on her hips at

the same time she did. "Get off me," she snapped and he let go. She got up, straightening her coat. "Creep."

"I'm ..." Peter swallowed. "Sorry, I'm ..."

"Hey, Lisa, is that your new boyfriend?" a girl walking past asked.

Her friend laughed along with her. "You can't get anyone better than a walking tragedy?"

The words stung but he saw that they bothered Lisa even more. She ducked her head away and pulled her shoulders up. He accepted Ned's help in getting up and asked, "Are you okay?"

"None of your business," she said and stalked off, the girls catcalling after her when she ran past them.

Ned handed Peter his phone. "She's rude."

"No, she's ..." Peter bit his lip. "I think she's just dealing with a lot."

"*You're* dealing with a lot."

Peter looked at him. "I'm fine."

When they stepped out of the school, Happy was waiting at the front entrance with a disgruntled look on his face, leaning against the hood of his car. "Great," he said. "Finally. Come on." He got in on the driver's side.

Ned asked, "His name isn't very fitting, is it?"

Peter shrugged. "Mr. Stark thinks the world of him." He gifted Ned with a strained smile and quickly headed towards the car, opening the passenger door. "Hey, Happy."

"Seatbelt," Happy answered.

Peter obliged quietly. "So ... what's up?" he asked.

Happy pulled into traffic. "I'm reduced to soccer mom duty, that's up."

"Aren't you happy to see me?" Peter asked. "Maybe a teeny-tiny bit?"

Happy stared ahead determinedly, not answering for a while. Peter was just giving up hope when Happy said, "Well, you kind of saved my ass a few weeks ago."

"I'll take that as a yes," Peter answered with a smile.

Happy shrugged and huffed a breath.

"Does that mean we can we get ice cream?"

"Don't push it."

Peter was limping.

Well, it wasn't so much limping as favoring his right side. He wasn't even being overly subtle about it, though Tony doubted that there was anything Peter Parker could be subtle about. He took

Peter down to his workshop as soon as Happy dropped him off, letting him take in the room once again with wide eyes and a giddy smile on his face before presenting him with the mended suit.

"This is awesome, Mr. Stark!" Peter said, looking at the Mark 2 and holding it closer to the bright lamp installed on the workbench to try and find where the material had been sliced open last night. "It's like it never happened!"

Tony took a sip of his coke and shrugged. "They *do* call me a genius for a reason."

Peter smiled at him sheepishly. "Thank you so much, Mr. Stark."

Tony waved a dismissive hand. "It was no big deal." It had given him a chance to check the suit from top to bottom and install some upgrades into the software. "How's the wound doing?"

"Fine," Peter answered, running his fingers over the suit to try and find the seam by touch.

Tony hummed thoughtfully and approached the workbench. "All healed up already?"

Peter made a noise of confirmation. "As good as." He was lying, and badly. He didn't make eye contact with Tony and his shoulders had tensed.

"So," Tony said casually, "where does the blood on your jeans come from then?"

Peter startled and looked down, just to find his jeans completely fine.

Tony smiled smugly. "Made you look."

Peter looked up at him and sighed deeply, defeated.

"Kid," Tony said, raising his eyebrows, "remember how we talked about sepsis and death?"

"It's fine, Mr. Stark. Honest. Just a little sore and it didn't heal completely yet and I kinda ran into a door, that's all. So it bled a bit."

Tony crossed his arms. "A bit?"

"A tiny amount," Peter confirmed. "It's nothing, Mr. Stark."

Tony stared at him, his eyes narrowed. Peter wasn't giving him the whole story, but he was standing upright and he was talking, his dark eyes clear and his hands steady. He looked a little tired, though. Not alarmingly, just ... tired. "Good." He turned away. "Still, what happened yesterday made me think and I came to the decision that you should get some formal hand-to-hand combat training."

Peter stared at him, the suit in his hands forgotten. "Really?"

"So I thought you could come here after school tomorrow. Rhodey will join us and take you through a few moves."

"Rhodey? As in Colonel Rhodes? As in *War Machine*?" Peter asked, his eyes going even wider. "For real?"

"Just to gauge what you can do," Tony cautioned, "so that he can develop a training plan for you. And then you can come by the compound for a weekend for some *real* training."

Peter seemed speechless for approximately three seconds, then he whispered, "Training at the

compound? Seriously?"

Tony sighed, exasperated. "Kid, yes! Really, for real, seriously."

Peter came around the workbench and Tony had the sudden fear that he might try and go in for a hug, but before he could settle on how he'd feel about that, Peter stopped himself and crossed his arms over his chest instead. He looked self-conscious and insecure all of a sudden and Tony wondered what had went wrong. Whether it was his fault. For some reason, he really didn't like the kid looking like that because of him. Peter smiled vaguely. "That sounds ... that sounds *so* great, Mr. Stark, thank you."

Tony shrugged. "Yeah, it's as much for my comfort as for yours, kid. Your aunt will come after me with a pitchfork if you get hurt on my watch."

Peter showed a small smile. "After both of us," he said. "When would I go to the compound?"

Tony shrugged. "Next weekend?"

Peter stilled. Just for a second, *something* flashed over his face but it was gone again just as quickly. He smiled. "Sure, sounds great."

Tony shook his head. "What was that?"

"What?"

"*That*. That expression you just had on your face. What's going on next weekend?"

Peter ducked his head and then he was suddenly all over the suit again. "Nothing."

Tony raised an eyebrow and waited.

Peter chanced a short look at him and sighed in defeat. "Decathlon teambuilding in Philadelphia." He shook his head. "But I can skip that, Mr. Stark."

"No way," Tony replied. "We agreed that you would stay on the ground. This is part of that."

"But you invited me to be part of the team."

"And you turned me down," Tony replied. "I appreciate your offer, but even *if* you had joined the team, there is no way that I would have you miss out on leading a normal life. That's what a secret identity allows you to do."

Peter took a breath, his thumb rubbing circles against the suit. His eyes lowered and he shrugged. "Normal isn't so great."

Tony frowned questioningly. "Why not?"

Peter shrugged again.

"What's the matter, Moody?" Tony asked.

"Nothing," Peter answered. He raised his head to look at Tony and gave him a bright smile. It seemed fake. "I'm good." He started to fold up the suit carefully. "I should get going."

Tony watched him, torn between leaving him be and prying. Between acting as he had since he'd walked into Peter's life and trying to find a new way of dealing with him.

When Tony had first read Peter's file after finding out just *who* was jumping around Queens in a horrid red and blue suit, he'd considered staying away entirely. There was no doubt in his mind that Peter, having lost his parents and his uncle to violent deaths, was dragging around some serious baggage. He'd decided against staying away in the end because he'd needed someone on his side against Cap and Peter was the only enhanced human he could find that quickly.

However, he'd rethought his decision after Germany and kept his distance, unwilling to stay near someone as fragile when he somehow always ended up smashing things. Happy had acted as a buffer, a way to keep Peter away while also keeping tabs on him. And it had worked for a while.

Until Peter had felt the need to go up against the Vulture clad in nothing but a suit made out of cotton, his homemade web-shooters and his resilience fueled by a sense of responsibility and the kind of bravery that got people killed.

Tony had become aware after that he couldn't just watch from a distance. It was clear that Peter was lacking guidance. And it was no big deal, really, as long as that guidance revolved around everything having to do with Spider-Man. He was safe territory. Tony knew how to equip a superhero, how to train them, how to enable them. What he didn't know was what to do with an impressionable, half-formed human being like Peter.

It was no secret that Tony didn't have a great track record with women, he'd done plenty of drugs and underage drinking in his youth. Tony Stark wasn't exactly the kind of person mothers wanted their sons to look at as role models.

Peter had stashed the suit in his backpack and was zipping it closed. "Right, Mr. Stark, I'll be by after school tomorrow then?"

"Sure."

Peter smiled weakly and headed for the door.

Tony felt a stab at the smile he gave him, remembering all the times he himself had worn that exact same expression, hiding something darker and sadder underneath. "Peter," he said and the kid stopped, turning back to him.

"Yeah?"

Tony took a breath, prepared to ask what was going on, (*is everything alright at school? At home?*) but the words died on his tongue. He had no right to ask, to get involved. He sighed, his shoulders slumping. "No patrolling tonight. Give that wound a rest."

Peter nodded. "Right. Bye."

"Yeah," Tony answered as the door slid closed. "Bye, kid."

There was pressure on his chest, against his sides, his legs trapped by rubble and steel, darkness and dust settling around him as water dripped onto his head. He couldn't breathe properly, couldn't even move ... panic clawed at his chest and up his throat and he sobbed brokenly, screaming as loud as he could, "Help, please! I'm down here! I'm down here, I'm stuck! I'm stuck, I can't move! I can't ..."

A taloned foot stepped into his line of vision and he choked on his words, his hands frantically grabbing at the concrete around him, trying to pull himself out to escape, to get away, (how could

*he have been so stupid to cry out, of course **he** was still around, he would **kill** him ...)*

... a strong hand grabbed him and pulled him out the rubble with a cruel, quick movement that made Peter's bones creak in protest and forced a scream out of his lungs.

Toomes looked at him with a smirk. "Didn't I tell you?" he asked, dropping Peter.

He landed amidst the rubble, dust getting into his airways and eyes, making him cough, his eyesight blurry ... something else landed beside him and Peter blinked to clear his vision, turning his head automatically. His breath stuttered in his chest when he saw it was May, staring at him with empty eyes, her face pale, bloodless ... lifeless.

"No," he whispered, horrified. "No."

One foot settled on his chest, the talon piercing into Peter's flesh, causing him to scream out yet again. "Didn't I tell you?" Toomes asked. "Don't get involved."

He raised his foot, the talon now pointing at Peter's face and brought it down.

"Peter!"

He yelped and reared back, his feet tangled in something and his limbs shaky ... and then he fell.

"Peter!"

A hand reached for him and he slapped it away, jumping to the ceiling and backing himself into the nearest corner he could find, looking around with his breath coming in panicked bursts, looking for his suit, his web-shooters ... anything.

May stared at him with wide eyes, crouched on the floor next to his bed. "Peter?"

He recognized his room now, light spilling in from the hallway and, faintly, from the street lights outside. He shivered and pressed further into the corner, the walls and ceiling bracketing him reassuringly. "May?"

"Yes." She straightened and came closer slowly, reaching up a hand to touch his foot. Her warm fingers – *alive!* – wrapped around his ankle carefully. "It's okay. It was just a nightmare."

His t-shirt was sticking to his chest and back, his hair and face were sweaty. His shoulder ached, his heart slowly calmed down. He took a breath. "Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you."

She pressed the fingers of her free hand against her lips, the other still resting on his ankle, and then gave a teary smile. "That's okay, baby, it's fine. Why don't you ... come down here?"

He breathed out and nodded weakly, swallowing thickly before letting go of the ceiling carefully. As soon as he landed on the floor, May pulled him into a hug. He buried his face in her shoulder and clung back, trying to feel her chest move with her breaths, trying to hear her heartbeat. "I'm fine," he whispered.

"You're fine," she repeated with a hollow laugh.

He nodded and squeezed her tighter for a moment before letting go. "Just ... the plane crash, you know?"

May had demanded the whole story about Toomes when she'd found out about Spider-Man. Peter had given her as much as he'd dared without upsetting her too much, playing down the almost-

drowning to a mere dip in the lake and glossing over the part where the building had collapsed on top of him. He hadn't mentioned the stab wound, either, even though he'd admitted to the fight on Coney Island leaving him a little worse for the wear.

The plane crash was something he hadn't been able to lie about, though, something that he couldn't trivialize.

With a weak smile, he added, "Good thing I never have to fly anywhere."

May brushed his sweaty hair out of his forehead, her dark eyes staring at him searchingly. "Yeah," she finally said. "Are you okay now?"

"Yes," Peter answered. "Let's just ... go back to bed."

"If you're sure."

He nodded and sat on the edge of his mattress, glancing at the clock. "Yeah, we still have a few hours left."

May hesitated a moment longer her arms crossing over the old t-shirt of Ben's she was wearing to sleep. Finally, though, to his relief, she nodded. "Okay. See you tomorrow."

"Night, May."

She left the door ajar and the light in the hallway switched on, just as her and Ben had done whenever he'd had a nightmare as a child. He didn't mind too much, stretching out on his bed and staring at the top bunk in the dim illumination. He rubbed over the scar on his shoulder carefully, wincing when it throbbed a little.

Toomes was in prison, he knew that. Rationally.

"I'll kill you and everybody you love. I'll kill you dead."

Toomes was in prison.

One day, he would get out again.

"I'll kill you and everybody you love."

He didn't go back to sleep.

Chapter 6

Chapter by [JolinarJackson](#)

Chapter 6

Peter was hunched over his English Lit homework in the farthest corner of the busy school canteen, his earbuds blasting music to drown out the painful sounds around him. Since he'd barely gotten any sleep last night, his senses were all over the place today. The lights seemed brighter, irritating his eyes, and the way to school through the November air had been torture, every piece of exposed skin hurting in the icy morning breeze. Sound was the worst, though, piercing into his eardrums and causing his head to ache. His music, though loud, helped him to focus, providing a familiar, steady sound backdrop undisturbed by the clinking of cutlery, the laughter, the voices talking loudly over one another.

He looked up when Ned set his tray down and slid into the chair on the opposite side of the table. Pulling out his earbuds and letting them fall to dangle around his neck, Peter smiled at him. The noise of the school canteen was overwhelming for a moment while he got adjusted, but he was able to recover with barely a wince showing. "Hey."

"Hey," Ned answered. "You okay?" They hadn't seen each other at all today, yet, their schedules sending them into different classes. Ned leaned in close. "How's the ... you know?"

Peter shook his head, patting his side for good measure. "It's fine. Almost healed." It was the truth. He'd listened to Mr. Stark and hadn't gone out on patrol the night before, instead finishing up an essay he'd been struggling with all week. Apparently, the knife wound had needed that kind of rest, because this morning, it was barely visible anymore, just a thin line of pink new skin. It still hurt a bit when he pressed down on it, though, so he guessed that the healing was only finished on the surface. It would suffice for today's gym class. They were going swimming. Peter doubted that he could have missed out on the class with the same excuse the girls sometimes did.

"You know," Ned said, mixing his potato mash with the peas, "what you did yesterday was actually pretty badass."

Peter raised an eyebrow, continuing with his own lunch. "The being shoved into a locker?"

"The pushing Quentin," Ned clarified.

Peter winced. "I lost my cool for a moment."

"You should do that more often."

Peter's eyes widened and he looked around before he lowered his voice and answered, "No way. Are you crazy?"

Ned rolled his eyes. "I'm not saying go full Spider-Man on them. Just a bit, just sometimes."

"I can't. Do you have any idea how much effort it took not to push him right through the wall? I could have hurt him real bad."

Ned scoffed. "So what? He's a jerk."

"I could have *killed* him," Peter said. He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Listen, way too many

clues are already pointing towards me, I can't risk drawing attention."

Ned seemed to mull that over. "So what *if* they find out? Iron Man is cool without his identity being out there."

Peter sighed, poking the potato mash with his fork. He wasn't very hungry, his headache preventing a real appetite.

"Would it be so bad to go public?" Ned asked.

"What if they decide to use May against me? Or you?"

"Would they dare? With you being Spider-Man, being backed by Iron Man? You're practically an *Avenger*."

Peter shrugged. "I don't think ..." He shook his head. "I don't think I should bring Spider-Man into this. Flash is just pissed about being first alternate and Quentin is just playing along. They'll stop. I'll just ignore it until they do."

Ned looked doubtful. "Quentin *was* just playing along, but you pissed him off yesterday." He grinned. "Even though it was awesome."

Peter felt an answering grin tugging at his lips and he shook his head with a laugh.

Setting her tray down next to Ned and dropping into the seat, MJ asked, "What are you girls giggling about?" She opened her juice carton and took a bite of her sandwich before she asked, "Is it okay if I join you losers?"

Ned gave her a pointed look. "You already made yourself comfortable."

"I'll take that as a yes." She leaned back in her chair, her dark eyes regarding both of them calmly, her unruly, curly hair falling into her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Flash being an ass," Ned answered. "Why can't you kick him off the team?"

Peter saw Quentin and Flash enter the canteen. They looked around and Peter ducked his head away, shifting to hide behind Ned. He hated himself just a moment later for doing so and put his head in one hand, hunching his shoulders.

"Hey, Peter! You okay?"

Peter blinked at MJ, who was frowning at him. "What?"

"You zoned out."

"Oh? No, I'm fine. Just, you know ... tired from studying last night."

"Studying?" MJ asked. She took a bite of her sandwich, and with her mouth still full continued, "You? You have, like, an eidetic memory."

"That's not true," Peter replied. "I study."

"You never failed a test or had anything worse than a C. And that was only once, in gym class."

Peter didn't quite know what to say to that, except for, "I study *a lot*."

Ned was staring at MJ quizzically. "How do you know what grades he has?"

"Observance," MJ answered. She shrugged. "I know all your little secrets."

"You don't know *everything*," Ned replied.

"Really?" MJ asked, leveling her dark eyes at Peter. "Don't I?"

Peter's heart skipped a beat. He didn't know *why* he was afraid that MJ could know about Spider-Man, she wouldn't use the information to harm him ... it was just an instinctive reaction. He had probably spent too long trying to hide it from everyone.

Maybe Ned was right. Maybe now – with May in the know and Mr. Stark having his back – he should think about making it official. But what would happen then, he wondered. It wasn't as if he could go back to living a life as Peter Parker if he did that.

Then again ... would that be so bad? A new, improved version of himself was a chance to get rid of all the things he hated: the insecurity, the anxiety, the weakness. Everything that was better about Spider-Man could finally help to make Peter Parker an improved person.

Somebody poked his arm. MJ raised her eyebrows at him. "You zoned out again," she said. "Did you hit your head or something?"

He gave a weak smile. "Too many times to count."

It happened so incredibly fast that Peter didn't have time to process what was going on as a hand wrapped around his ankle and pulled. The water closed over his head as the strong grip jerked him down and he flailed, having had no time to draw a proper breath. Arms went around his waist and pulled him further down into the depths of the clear water of the swimming pool before they settled on his shoulders firmly.

In the time Peter had gone out as Spider-Man, he'd learned that there were two things that his enhanced powers couldn't fight very well.

One was electricity. He'd thought he was done in for when he'd hit the ground near a downed power line during a storm and the electric charge had traveled through his body. He'd been unable to move properly for half an hour, had barely possessed the strength to drag himself into a hiding place behind a dumpster to recover, his heart struggling to find a steady rhythm again. His body hadn't stopped twitching for another twenty minutes after that and he'd felt the ache in his muscles for two more days before he'd finally deemed the experience over. At least he'd survived. He was sure that the charge would have killed a normal human.

The other thing that could severely hinder his skills was water. His strength failed him in the weightlessness and it was even worse when he didn't have any purchase, no ground to push up from, no wall to anchor himself to.

And right now, he lacked exactly those things. The floor of the swimming pool was somewhere beneath him, out of reach of his pedaling feet and he was too far away from any of the pool's edges to be able to reach the tiled walls.

His hands went up, gripping the wrists holding him tight and trying to pull the other person down with him but a kick to his shoulder put a stop to it. He felt a blinding pain, as if something in his shoulder *shifted*, and he screamed almost soundlessly, the last of his air reserves leaving him. He

could see his classmates get out of the pool at the other end – *too far away* – and when he looked up, he could make out someone above him, head over water and keeping Peter under the surface.

He kicked his feet and tried to swim up, managing to breach the surface for just a second before the other guy – Quentin, it was *Quentin* – pushed him down again, keeping a tight grip on Peter's arm as he tried to dive deeper and away. The bottom of the pool was too far away, the walls were unreachable, the water made it impossible to gain enough momentum to pull Quentin down as well, not like this, not with his lungs screaming for air and the beat of his heart loud in his ears ...

... and the parachute tightening around him and getting heavier, soaked with water, pulling him down and down and down ...

... and then he was pulled up and pushed away and he swam without thinking about it, gaining distance until his trembling fingers found purchase at the pool's edge. He gasped and coughed, taking deep breaths.

"Peter!" he heard someone yell, but he couldn't answer.

A tight grip wrapped around his wrists and pulled him out entirely, setting him down on the tiles none too gently. "That'll teach you," Quentin hissed, his face in Peter's line of vision for just a second before he straightened. "He was lucky I saw him go under, Coach."

"Peter." Ned knelt next to him. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Fine," Peter gasped. He coughed, still trembling, trying to ban the thought of the murky water he'd almost drowned in during his first encounter with the Vulture.

Coach Wilson crouched down as well, one hand settling on Peter's shoulder as his dark eyes searched him for injuries. "Jesus, Parker. What happened?"

Quentin said, "I bet it was a cramp. That kind of thing happens when people take on more than they can handle."

Peter raised his head to stare at him incredulously. Ned's hand on his back twitched, his fingers curling into a fist.

"Was it a cramp?" Coach Wilson asked.

Peter could have told the truth but he wasn't able to prove it. Not even Ned had seen what had happened, he was just putting pieces together. Quentin had clearly thought this through, acting just as everyone was getting out of the pool and heading for the changing rooms, Wilson's attention diverted.

So he said the only thing he could. "My leg. It cramped. I'm okay now."

When Peter showered after class, he tried not to think about water trickling down his face while he screamed for help amidst the rubble.

On the bus on the way back to school, he went to the row at the back and hunched into it, his backpack held tight against his chest and his forehead against the window. The others started to file in slowly, none of them paying any attention to him. Peter curled up tighter in his seat and stared outside.

His shoulder ached.

"Peter."

He startled, jumping in the seat.

Ned put a calming hand on his shoulder and settled into the seat next to him. "Hey, are you okay? You ran out of there before I could catch up with you."

Peter pulled his shoulders up. "I'm fine."

Ned nodded slowly. "Don't let him get to you, man. Just ignore him and-"

"Be myself?" Peter asked bitterly. "I thought no one wants that."

Ned's expression twisted into something mournful and sad. Just like it had when Peter had told him about Ben's death. "Peter--"

"No, you're right. No one wants that. You know what, not even *I* want that." He ducked his head when he saw a few heads turn in his direction and added in a lower voice. "You're right, I can be better than this when I'm *him*. Being ..." He bit his tongue, reminding himself that they were in a bus full of students. "But I'm just ... *stuck*. I'm stuck like this." He stared at Ned, who was looking at him, his dark eyes wide, clearly unsure what to say. Peter closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Sorry, I'm just angry. Not at you."

"That's okay," Ned said. "I get it." He hesitated. "You're not serious, though, right? I mean, I say stuff and I said that you should reveal your identity because it would be totally cool and everything but ... it's just because ..." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Spider-Man's so awesome, but it doesn't mean ..." He shrugged and bumped Peter's shoulder with his own. "You know, he's not my best friend. *You* are."

Peter shook his head and heaved a breath, his hand rubbing his aching shoulder. "I've been a crappy friend. Spending so much time on ... the internship. I just ..."

Ned shrugged. "I get it. And you're not, you know? Crappy, I mean. You tell me everything." He grinned. "My life has never been this exciting before."

Peter ducked his head. It hurt that Ned wasn't aware Peter was still keeping things from him.

*... like the weight of rubble on his body pressing down to suffocate him, like murky water closing in around him as he struggled to get to the surface, like the feeling of utter helplessness and desperation and please, please, **please** ...*

He forced a smile. "Course. You're my guy in the chair."

Tony cringed when Peter landed on the mat again, Rhodey wiping his forehead and bopping on his feet, the updated exoskeleton Tony had designed for him whirring obediently underneath his sweatpants. Tony looked at his tablet, keeping an eye on the mobility of the leg braces while Peter got up slowly. The air in the penthouse's small gym, which Tony had set up next to his workshop on the lower floor, was a bit stuffy. Peter and Rhodey had been spending the last hour sparring in the corner that was padded with mats, Tony watching from his seat on a bench from the sidelines.

"Again," Rhodey said, rolling his shoulders and raising his fists.

Peter grimaced, tugging the oversized t-shirt he was wearing for the training in place. His hair was matted to his forehead with sweat. He looked tired again, dark shadows residing under his eyes.

Rhodey was sweaty as well but he was smiling. "Come on, kid. Was that all you've got?"

Peter jumped to attack, clinging to the ceiling with his hands as he swung his feet in Rhodey's direction for a kick. Rhodey ducked and grabbed his ankle, twisting to pull Peter down. Peter went with the movement and landed on his hands, wrenching his ankle from Rhodey's grip by flipping back onto his feet and immediately attacking again, his hits blocked almost effortlessly.

Part of the problem, Tony could easily see, was that Peter was holding back. He pulled his punches and kicks, probably out of concern he could hurt Rhodey by accident, but the effort distracted him, making it easier for Rhodey to keep the upper hand.

Right now, Rhodey was luring Peter closer. "Look out, kid," Tony said, just as Rhodey lunged, swiping Peter's feet from under him. Peter fell and hit his head against the mat. He waited for Rhodey to try and pin him to flip him over his shoulder, following behind to hold Rhodey to the mat in turn. He didn't get a grip of Rhodey's hand fast enough, though, and was punched in the sternum, then rolled around with Rhodey hovering over him. Peter twisted, managing to get on his belly and throw Rhodey off, getting back on his feet and stepping out of reach. He swayed for a moment, his breathing coming in sharp pants.

Rhodey got to his feet as well, wiping his forehead. "Not good enough," he said and Tony could see Peter tense at the words, his eyes darkening in frustration. Rhodey shook his head. "If I'd had a knife, I would have had too many chances to get you. *Again.*"

Tony saw Peter's fingers twitch towards his palms but he wasn't wearing his web-shooters. The whole point was to train him *not* to rely on them.

Peter moved and Rhodey let him come, stepping aside at the last moment to deliver a light punch to Peter's kidney, forcing him to his knees. Tony heard Peter hiss a breath in pain, but Rhodey didn't stop, wrapping an arm around his neck and pulling upward while his free hand twisted Peter's arm.

"And I slice your throat," Rhodey said before he let go and moved away, leaving Peter panting on the mat. Rhodey wiped his face with a towel and took a drink from his water bottle before he looked at Tony. "He can hold his own against muggers but I wouldn't bet on him being able to get away from trained fighters."

"I got away from *Captain America*," Peter said and it was almost funny to see a pout emerge on his face. He grimaced in pain and pressed one hand against his side. Tony pulled a face in sympathy. He'd been hit in the kidney himself. It *was* painful. Even with Rhodey not trying to do any real damage.

Tony chuckled. "I hate to break it to you, but Cap kicked your butt. And I think he went easy on you."

Rhodey smiled. "He's good," he told Tony. "Flexible, fast, strong, smart and he can adapt quickly. He hasn't reached his full potential, though. He holds back, too much defense, not enough offense. He can be better."

Peter slumped onto the bench next to Tony. "I can't punch you with all my strength, you'd die. And I would be better with the shooters."

"That's the whole point, Peter," Rhodey replied. "You have to learn to control your strength. Keep it at the required level without being too soft. And what if your shooters are lost, taken, malfunctioning?"

"I take offense at that," Tony interrupted. "They would *not* malfunction."

Rhodey rolled his eyes. "They're not at your disposal," he told Peter earnestly. "You need to be able to fight without the suit, without the shooters. An attack can happen anytime, anywhere."

Peter's face hardened, his lips pressing together and his gaze going to the floor. "I know."

"Okay." Rhodey squeezed his shoulder and smiled encouragingly. "You're doing good." To Tony, he said, "I'm gonna hit the shower."

Tony waited until he'd left the gym before he asked Peter, "Want some ice for that bruised ego of yours?"

Peter looked up at him, his expression crestfallen. "You're hilarious."

Tony smiled but it dimmed when it wasn't returned fully. "He's a trained elite soldier, kid. And that was before he became a trained Avenger. Don't worry about him beating you."

"I'm not," Peter answered, rolling a bottle of water between his palms.

"So you're brooding, because ..."

Peter shrugged and winced at the movement.

"Something wrong with your shoulder?" Tony asked. He'd noticed throughout the training that Peter kept favoring his right shoulder, sometimes wincing when he moved it.

"It's nothing."

"Then it shouldn't be a problem to show it to me."

Peter sighed and turned to face him. Tony pulled at the collar of his t-shirt until Peter's shoulder was exposed. His stomach dropped. There was a thin scar just above Peter's collarbone, which looked relatively fresh but fully healed. What startled Tony was the bruise blooming around it.

"That wasn't Rhodey," he said.

"No, this ..." Peter sighed. "The scar is from the Vulture, the bruise happened during patrol yesterday. Some guy got a lucky hit in."

Tony frowned at him. "Didn't I tell you to stay home to let that knife wound heal up?"

Peter froze, his breath hitching as a blush spread over his cheeks. He ducked his head. "I ... went out."

Tony let go of the t-shirt and got up, releasing a frustrated breath as he started to pace. "Damn it, Peter. This is exactly what I'm talking about when I say you're reckless."

"It's just a bruise."

"I'm not talking about the bruise, I'm talking about *listening to me*." He scoffed and put his hands on his hips. "Which you are not. I actually *do* have the experience, Peter. I actually *do* know what

I'm talking about when I'm giving you-"

"Alright, okay?" Peter snapped and got up, gathering his backpack and his clothes. "I got it. I was wrong, you were right. I'm a loser."

"Hey," Tony said, snagging Peter's arm as he was about to head for the door. "I didn't say that."

"You *meant* it."

"No, I didn't." He stared at Peter, saw his eyes flit away, his shoulders hunching defensively. Tony softened his grip. "What's going on, kid?"

"Nothing."

"Lie."

Peter sighed. "I'm just ... frustrated."

"With?"

"Life."

"Ah," Tony said. He rested his hand on Peter's shoulder, hesitating for a moment before he asked, "Is it ... a girl?"

Peter's eyes widened. "No!"

"Thank God," Tony replied, relieved. "I'm mentally not prepared yet to talk to you about ... hormones and ..." He grimaced.

Peter rolled his eyes. "You know I'm fifteen, right?"

Tony shrugged and moved away, picking up his tablet computer. "So, what *is* the problem?"

Peter hesitated, his arms hugging his backpack and clothes to his chest. "If I were to decide ... I wanted to out my identity-"

"Bad idea," Tony interrupted him.

"What?"

"Even as an Avenger, we would have kept your identity a secret, Peter. Non-negotiable. You're too vulnerable."

Peter's forehead creased and his eyes narrowed. "I'm not weak!"

Tony frowned at the outburst. "I didn't say you're weak. I said you're vulnerable. Big difference." He sighed deeply. "Peter ... school sucks. I know."

Peter ducked his head.

"But you have to get through it, okay? See it as a stepping stone towards college."

"Right," Peter said softly, shaking his head. "College."

Tony pressed his lips together. *Something* was wrong, had been since Peter had arrived at his penthouse. He was quieter than usual, almost ... sad. "What's going on, Peter?"

Peter looked at him for a moment, then quickly averted his eyes again. He shook his head. "I'm just ..." He trailed off and Tony kept looking at him, waiting. But Peter didn't speak again.

Tony cleared his throat. "You don't have to tell me. You *can*, but you don't *have* to."

Peter stared at him, his hands clenching. "I ..." He swallowed and shook his head. "I'd rather not, Mr. Stark."

Tony nodded slowly, trying to cover up the unexpected hurt he felt at the words. "Okay. I'll show you to the bathroom, you can take a quick shower and I'll drive you home."

"Okay, Mr. Stark." He paused. "I ... sorry."

Tony frowned. "What for?"

Peter pressed his lips together and shrugged. He was avoiding Tony's eyes again.

With a sigh, Tony said, "No harm done, okay? As I said, there's nothing you *have* to tell me if it doesn't have to do with Spider-Man, alright?"

Peter nodded, but he didn't look entirely convinced. "Okay."

Chapter 7

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Whatever had been bothering Peter, it seemed to be gone or ignored successfully by the time Tony drove him home. Tony almost felt like he'd unintentionally caught a glimpse of the person Peter was behind his perpetual smile, but before he'd had the chance to look properly, that person was gone again.

Hidden away.

Tony knew exactly how that felt, how much effort it took. He wasn't going to pry when Peter was apparently so unwilling to share.

Instead, he listened while he drove, Peter's enthusiasm about an upcoming Physics project coming to a head. "And it's incredible, Mr. Stark, because we are going to spend *weeks* discussing Doctor Banners's research. It would be so cool if you could, like, introduce us? I mean, I know he hasn't been around much and I don't mean to be, like ... but ... it would be so *awesome* if he could come and visit or something. Not that I'm trying to get him to. I'm just asking." He paused before adding with a bit less self-confidence, "Just putting it out there?"

Tony hummed. "I'd love to, kid, but I have actually no contact to Bruce at the moment." They had never made Bruce's disappearance public, most people assuming that he had went back into hiding after the whole Ultron fiasco. The bitter truth was that they had looked for him for months and they hadn't been able to find even the slightest trace. Tony knew it had broken Natasha's heart. The both of them had become quite close since the Avengers had first teamed up together.

"Oh." Peter's face fell a little. "Too bad." However, it only took a second for his smile to reappear. "'Cause, you know, I've been reading his research backwards and forwards, like, a thousand times. Because of the bite. Well, not *just* because of the bite. Because it's awesome and interesting. But also because-"

"Hold on a second," Tony interrupted him and looked at Peter when he stopped at a red light. "You read Bruce's papers?"

Peter looked back at him and he almost seemed afraid, as if he was scared Tony would call him out on a lie. "Yeah."

The lights changed to green and Tony quickly turned into Peter's street, parking in front of his building. He switched off the engine and shifted to sit facing Peter a bit more. "You understood them?"

Peter shrugged. "Like, 80% I guess. Some of it just went over my head."

"20% went over your head?" Tony asked incredulously. "Because, kid, it should've been the other way around."

Peter looked at him and lifted his shoulders as if to shrug again but they stayed up, tense. His eyes flitted away. The orange light of the street lamps falling through the car's windows softened Peter's features, making him appear even younger than he already was. Tony could almost imagine what he'd looked like at ten or eleven years old: curious brown eyes and a blinding smile ... so far away from the bitter and rejected mess Tony had been already at that age.

And yet, it seemed as if they had something in common.

"How smart are you?" Tony asked.

Peter bit his lip. "I don't know. I ... passed Midtown High's entrance quiz but so did everyone else there, so ..."

Tony looked at him thoughtfully. He'd known of course that Peter wasn't stupid. One of the things that had drawn Tony's attention were the self-made web-shooters as well as the webbing. Peter was resourceful and clever, there was no doubt about it, but he'd never really looked into *how* smart Peter actually was. He might have to do some digging later, maybe find out whether Midtown High kept those quizzes on their server. "You're interested in that kind of stuff? Physics?" It felt strange to ask. He should know, considering they'd met months ago, but then again, they'd only gone to Germany together and even there, Happy had been spending most of the time with Peter. After Germany, Tony had kept that distance and only now, he was slowly getting around to actually learn who Peter Parker was behind the mask.

"Chemistry and physics," Peter answered. "Also engineering."

"What are your plans for later?" Tony asked.

Peter shrugged. "Maybe take a nap and go on patrol for an hour or two."

Tony rolled his eyes. "In life."

"Oh." Peter drew a breath as if to answer, but then he hesitated before settling on, "I don't really know."

"Don't you have any ideas? What about college?"

Peter's gaze lowered, his fingers picking on loose threads on his backpack. "It's complicated."

"Is it?"

Peter pressed his lips together. "I'd rather not talk about it, Mr. Stark."

Tony nodded slowly. "Okay."

"Sorry."

"No, that's alright." He smiled. "Feel free to skedaddle."

Peter gave him a weak smile and got out of the car. Tony frowned at himself in the rearview mirror.

"May?" Peter pushed open the door to her bedroom carefully and peered inside. "I'm back."

She looked at him from where she was curled up in bed, her dark eyes red-rimmed and her hair a tangled mess. She looked exhausted and defeated, so different from the woman that she usually was. She hadn't left the bed since the funeral a week ago. The sandwich Peter had left for her before he'd gone to school was untouched. The window was still open, cold air seeping into the room.

Peter quickly went to close it. "Weren't you hungry at all?" he asked, sitting on the edge of her

bed.

"No."

Peter nodded slowly. "I ..." He swallowed. "I'm doing the laundry and I did some grocery shopping but we're out of cash now, so ... and work called. They left a message. About when you'll return?"

She closed her eyes.

"They said they understand but ... they said they have to know. And ..." Peter swallowed and reached out, taking May's hand. "I think it would be ... it would be good, you know?"

May released a shuddering breath and pulled on Peter's hand until he was stretched out beside her, with his head on her shoulder, her fingers running through his hair.

"May?"

She didn't answer.

Peter woke to May's fingers running through his hair and the tv showing a *Friends* rerun.

"Hey, sweetheart," May said softly and her thumb brushed over his brow. She sat on the edge of the couch. "Are you okay?"

Peter rubbed his eyes and stretched, his mind getting back into gear only sluggishly. "I'm tired."

She frowned and put her hand on his forehead. "It's been ages since I saw you fall asleep on the couch."

"I'm just beat. Didn't get enough sleep last night." He sat up and leaned in to kiss her cheek and then went into the kitchen, following the delicious smell of May's potato soup. He winced when his shoulder complained the movement, pressing his fingers into it to work the kinks out. "I wanted to take a nap before patrol, that's all." He leaned over the soup simmering on the stove. May must have come home a while ago already.

May had followed him and pushed him out of the way gently to stir. "How did the training with Tony go?"

"Okay." He started to set the table.

"He wasn't being too hard on you?"

Peter smiled at her. "It's all fine, May."

She bit her lip, her expression thoughtful. "You'd tell me if it wasn't? If he was being too pushy?"

Peter paused, looking at her questioningly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she answered. "I'm just making sure that he isn't ... you know, overdoing it." She sighed reluctantly. "Listen, Peter, you're only fifteen. I know you don't like to hear that but it's true. And I know that you would probably not tell Tony if he was being too ... intense."

Peter knew that May didn't like Mr. Stark very much. She never had, really. Ben had been a bit more partial towards Stark Industries, always telling May that, despite the company's shady past, they were trying to clean their act up. May had never agreed with him. Peter didn't think that had

much to do with the company, though, but more with Mr. Stark personally. May had always thought that he had too many women at his side and too many scandals splashed over the tabloids' title pages to be a trustworthy person. After meeting him, she'd once told Peter that she thought he was too slick, too charming, too nice.

Peter knew that, in the end, she was only trying to look out for him, but he wished that she would just believe him when he told her that Mr. Stark was making an effort. "He isn't. It's just ... it's training. It'll make ... it'll make me feel safer out there."

May sighed and brushed her hands through her hair, shaking her head. "Right. You're right. I'm just nervous."

"Why?"

"Because I think you'll take more risks if you learn how to fight better. And I don't like that. I ..."

She closed her eyes. "Frankly, I'm probably not as okay with this whole thing as you want me to be." She reached out to brush his hair out of his forehead, an apologetic gesture as she added, "I don't know if I ever *will* be."

Peter nodded slowly, letting the silence stretch for a moment before he asked, "Is it ..." He winced. "Is it because of Mr. Stark or--"

"In general," May replied. "Just ... all of it."

His hurt at her words must have shown on his face because she smiled sadly and cupped his face in her hands. "But I won't stop you, okay? That doesn't mean I'll do *that*, I'll just ... you have to give me a bit of time."

"I just need a bit of time, baby," she whispered into his hair as he lay next to her in bed. "I just ... I miss him."

Peter closed his eyes, forcing the tears away that were pushing towards the surface. "I know. I know. Me, too."

He just wished she would sleep less, eat more, get up and do something that would reassure him she was going to be okay.

May brushed her thumb over his cheek. "Can you do that?"

Peter nodded slowly. "Sure," he said. "Always."

Patrol was rather quiet, but Peter still felt exhausted by the time he was nearing the end of his usual route. He blamed the afternoon's training session before reluctantly admitting to himself that sleep had been a rather irregular thing for him ... and not just last night. His nightmares had become more vivid and frequent recently, especially since Quentin's appearance in Peter's life.

He stopped on one of the steel beams spanning Queensboro Bridge and rolled his mask up to his nose to take a few deep breaths of the cold November air. The suit's integrated heater helped him to work without any problems despite the nights getting colder.

"Karen, what's the time?"

"It's 10:05. I suggest that you start heading home."

"Yeah, I guess that's alright. It doesn't seem like ..." He trailed off, something on the footpath below him, towards the middle of the bridge, catching his attention. He narrowed his eyes, the lenses adjusting automatically, zooming in on what he'd spotted.

There, just where the bridge was starting to span over Roosevelt Island: the person had found a spot on the footpath that was barely illuminated and hard to see from the lower deck of the bridge, cars passing by unaware. They were standing on the bridge's rail, leaning forward over the chain-link fence, looking down.

They were going to jump.

Dread formed a heavy knot in Peter's belly. "Oh no," he muttered and started to run on the beams, shooting a web out as soon as he got close enough to land on the footpath gently, approaching the person carefully. "Hey."

They turned slightly, startled despite Peter's soft greeting, and he could now at least see that it was a woman he was dealing with. He halted for a moment, unsure how exactly to proceed. This was a first for him.

"Ma'am," he said finally, reaching out a hand, "you don't wanna do this." It sounded incredibly clichéd and incredibly useless.

She turned around to him fully now and he was startled to see that he knew her. It was the girl he'd already met on this bridge a few nights ago, the same girl he'd run into at school today. There were tears glistening on her cheeks. "I don't," she said thickly and stepped away from the fence. "Not right now."

Peter felt his stomach drop in relief and then clench at the implication of her words. He approached her slowly. "You're thinking about it."

She crossed her arms and shrugged.

Peter stared at her, unsure what to say. He swallowed against the lump in his throat. "Why?"

She huffed a bitter, joyless laugh. "Why?" She wiped her eyes. "I hate my fucking life, that's why."

He noticed that his hand was still raised towards her and dropped it.

Sniffing, she asked, "Aren't you gonna tell me that everything will be alright? That I've got to be strong and everything will be okay?"

"How can I if I don't know what the problem is?"

She stared at him, her blue eyes wide in surprise. "You want me to tell you?"

"If you want to."

She seemed to hesitate, but then she shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

"If it makes you stand on a bridge and even *consider* jumping, it matters."

Wiping her eyes, she released a shuddering breath. The wind caught in her short blonde hair and she shivered despite the warm jacket she was wearing.

"Listen, I'm not gonna ask, but if you wanna tell me, that's okay." He smiled, even though he knew that it would probably not show through the mask. "Or I can just take you home."

She looked at him carefully, as if she wasn't sure what to do about that offer.

He shrugged. "First one is optional, second one is mandatory and part of the service."

Her smile looked jagged and sad. "You're serious?" she asked. "Don't you have more important stuff to do?"

"Let me consult my to do list," he said and paused for a moment, as if doing just that. "Did *that*, did *that* ..." He smiled. "Definitely did that." He turned his grin to her. "Nope, didn't accompany a pretty girl home tonight, yet. It's an open point."

She sniffed and wiped her nose on her jacket. "You're kind of ridiculous."

"That felt like an insult. Was that an insult?"

"A statement," she answered and then sighed. "Okay, if it helps you cross that point off your vigilante to do list, you can take me to the train station."

"Cool," Peter said. "I'm great at walking girls to places. You'll see."

"I'm Lisa Greene," she said after they'd been walking for a few minutes, making their way towards Queens and off the bridge. Some people gave them weird looks as they passed. Peter had become used to getting those and he was able to ignore them. Lisa didn't seem overly bothered, either, her eyes on Peter instead, as if she was trying to figure him out.

Peter held out a hand for her to shake. "Hi, Lisa. I'm Spider-Man."

"As if you need introducing." Her blue eyes narrowed, looking at him carefully. "You could tell me your real name."

Peter smiled. "That would kind of defeat the purpose of a secret identity."

"Who am I gonna tell?" she asked quietly.

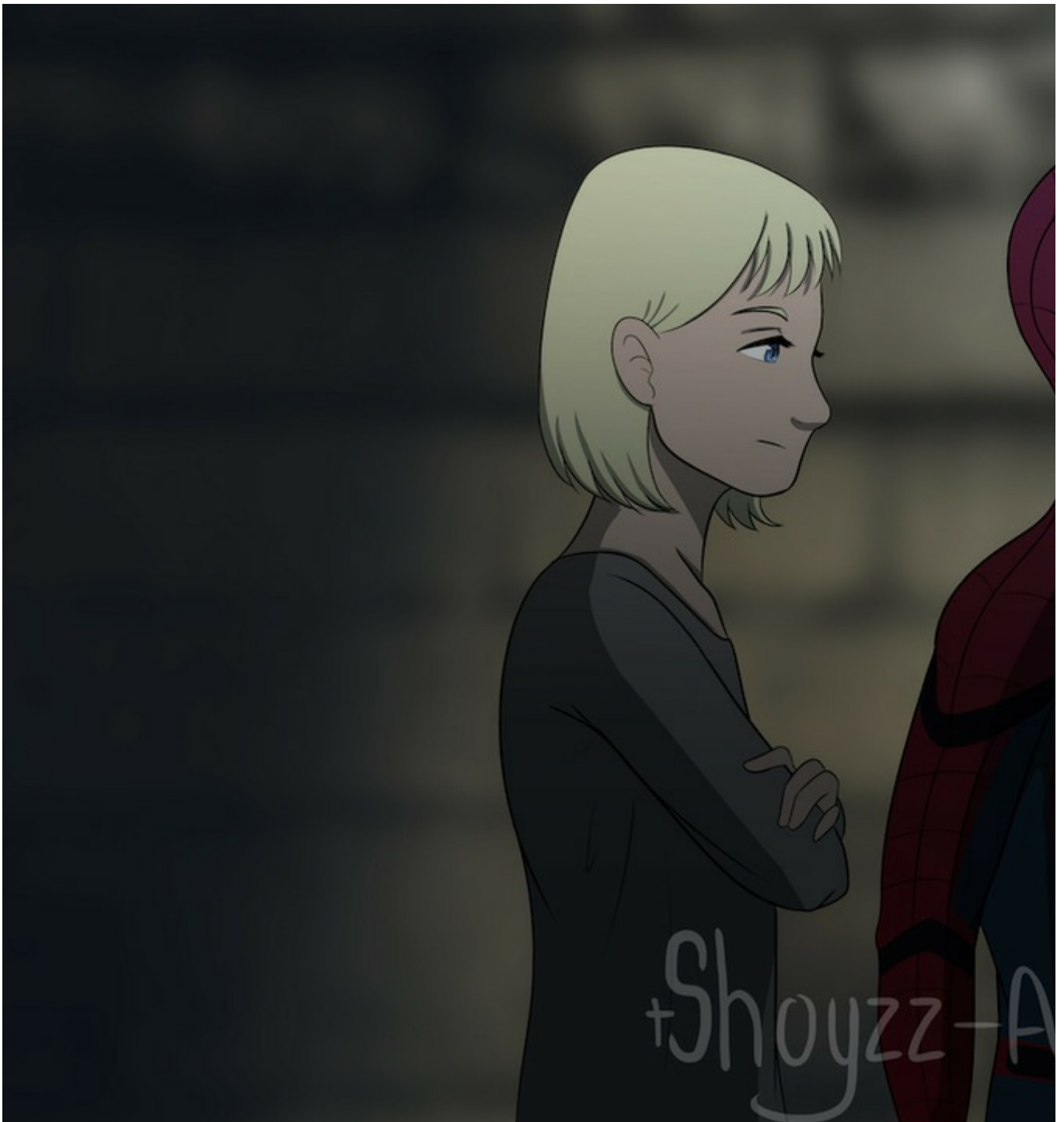
"Your friends, your family."

She snorted. "I don't have friends and my parents couldn't care less."

Peter felt his chest tighten in sympathy at her words. "I can't imagine a pretty girl like you not having any friends."

She scoffed. "You'd be surprised."

Peter mulled her words over, unsure how to proceed. He didn't want to dig too deep, aware that she was only opening up to him because he hadn't asked. They didn't speak again for a few minutes, late-night traffic rushing past next to them as they crossed Queensbridge Park.



Unexpectedly, she continued, "I'm not that pretty anyway. At least not if you believe the girls at school."

"Oh," he said, hesitating for a moment before he nodded and replied, "I get that."

"I'm sure you don't."

"Believe me, I do."

She stopped and he followed suit, looking at her as earnestly as possible through the mask while Lisa stared at him incredulously. "You're Spider-Man."

"Yeah, I'm Spider-Man *now*, but I've got a real life, you know. And people in that life aren't always so nice to me, either." It was strangely easy to talk about it with his mask on. Almost liberating. "Besides ... supervillains are bullies, too."

She crossed her arms, her eyes narrowed and her brows pulled together. She looked angry. "Okay, but do they make you feel like absolute crap? Ugly and stupid and worthless? Do they get someone you have a crush on to go out with you for Homecoming just to dump you in front of everyone, laughing in your face while doing it? And when you tell your parents, do they tell you to stop being a drama queen and to suck it up?" She didn't give him a chance to answer before she said, "I didn't think so." Her face crumpled. "It just hurts so much." She wiped her eyes, new tears forming as she looked away. "Sorry."

"No, it's okay," he answered quickly. "That's what I'm here for."

"Yeah," she said bitterly. "All just part of the service, right?"

"No, come on. That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean, then?"

"I meant just *that*," Peter answered. "It's what I'm here for. I try ... I try to help."

She crossed her arms, her face set into a frown.

Peter sighed. "Listen, I know ... it's gonna be fine. You just have to hold on, just a little while longer. It'll get better."

"Will it?" Lisa looked at him. "I thought it would be fine after middle school, but I was wrong. It only got worse."

Peter stared at her, taken aback by his own insecurities and fears being repeated back to him by somebody else. Lisa started walking again and Peter followed, trailing beside her in silence, trying to find the words for her that he hadn't found yet for himself.

When they reached Queensboro Plaza, Lisa looked up the stairs leading towards the trains. "This is me."

"Are you going to be okay?" Peter asked.

"For tonight," Lisa answered, "yeah."

She turned to go but Peter grabbed her arm. "Please," he said, shaking his head.

Lisa stepped away, Peter's hand sliding down her arm until Lisa caught and squeezed it for a short moment. Then she let go. "Thanks for walking with me," she said. Then she turned away and hurried up the stairs.

Peter stood by the foot of the stairs, torn between following her in secret and letting her go as she'd asked. A weight had settled in his stomach, making him feel nauseous.

"*Peter*," Karen said gently as if she was aware of his inner turmoil, "*it is now 10:32 and I estimate that you will need approximately twenty minutes to reach your home.*"

"What?" he asked numbly.

"*Curfew begins at 11:00 o'clock*," Karen reminded him.

Peter released a breath, nodding at a man who smiled at him as he walked by. "Right. Let's go then."

It was late enough that the letters on the computer screens were blurring together. The lights in the workshop were on the lowest setting, giving Tony's tired eyes a rest.

He'd been sitting in front of the screens for hours, going through line after line of coding. Tony had never really told Peter, but Karen's Baby Monitor Protocol didn't just record everything he did, it transferred the records to Tony every three hours and stashed them away on his private server for six months before deleting them. It wasn't just a safety measure which was supposed to make sure that Tony could find out what had happened in case Peter ever got into trouble, it was also a maintenance necessity. Many of the bugs in the suit's software that still came up weren't even noticeable for Peter, but Tony made sure to find and fix them before they became so. The issues were only minor details, small hiccups in the coding and the functionality. Nothing that would cause Tony to lose sleep over.

Identifying these small bugs wasn't what had kept Tony up this late tonight, though. It was what appeared to be a major system crash that had apparently happened last night. At first, he hadn't really noticed it, but once he did, he'd spent two hours trying to find out where such a major failure could stem from and why Peter hadn't reported it. By now, a theory had started to form ... and Tony didn't like it one bit.

"It's two in the morning. Why are you still up?" Rhodey asked, pulling him from his thoughts. Tony found him leaning in the doorway wearing an old army t-shirt and pajama pants. He looked like he'd been to bed already. Tony knew that, sometimes, pain in his lower back woke him up and caused him to lie awake for the rest of the night. Tonight seemed to be such an occasion. Rhodey's eyes were squinted and his expression pinched. He looked like he was in pain.

Tony rubbed his burning eyes and sighed deeply.

The sound caused Rhodey to straighten, immediately on alert. "What's wrong?"

"Peter."

Rhodey stepped closer. "Okay?"

Tony cleared his throat. "After the training this afternoon, I found a bruise on his shoulder and he said he got hurt last night on patrol."

"Okay," Rhodey said, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

Tony nodded. "But ... I went through Karen's logs today. There are no records for last night. I mean, no records *at all*. So either she had a *major* system crash, which Peter should have reported to me ..."

Rhodey tilted his head curiously. "Or?"

"Or she was inactive yesterday."

Rhodey crossed his arms and leaned back against Tony's workstation. "Meaning he didn't go on patrol?"

"At least not in the suit," Tony answered, "which is unlikely."

"You're saying he lied to you."

Tony closed his eyes, not wanting it to be true. "Looks that way."

"Why would he do that?"

"I have no idea." He released a breath.

"What will you do?"

"What *can* I do? Half of the kid's life is none of my business. What he does outside of that suit has, theoretically, nothing to do with me."

"Is that your actual opinion?"

"It's Peter's, apparently," Tony answered. He shook his head. "I tried to talk to him about college today. I tried asking him about school and his aunt a couple of days ago. He clams up immediately."

Rhodey smiled. "I wouldn't take it personally. He's a teenager."

Tony rubbed his forehead, sighing. "I know. I keep forgetting." He looked up at Rhodey. "He's just ... look, I know he's full of silly jokes and I don't get what half of the emojis he uses in his text messages even *mean* but ... he's got those moments. He's actually really ... he's really smart, Rhodey. He's got so much *potential*. And all I want to do is help but ... I don't know how if he won't talk to me."

Rhodey stared at him with a grin on his face.

"What?" Tony asked, unnerved.

"That sounded really parental. You need to be careful, Tony, somebody might think you care."

"Don't be an ass," Tony replied.

"I'm being realistic. You never cared much about kids, Tony."

"That's not true. I like kids."

Rhodey rolled his eyes. "Yes, you like them, from afar." He shrugged. "Though I never really got why. I always thought you'd make a good dad."

Tony scoffed. "Yeah, right."

"Yeah," Rhodey said determinedly, "*right*." He sighed. "Listen, I can't speak for Peter, I barely know the kid. But from what I've seen, he really looks up to you and he works hard to make you see him as a valuable asset. That might make it harder for him to talk to you about things going on in his life outside the suit." He grinned. "Now, I know you hate it, but this is where *patience* comes in."

Tony heaved a sigh and shook his head.

"Don't push him," Rhodey said. "He'll come to you when he's ready."

"If he'll ever be," Tony answered.

"He will," Rhodey said. "Believe me."

Chapter 8

Chapter by [JolinarJackson](#)

Chapter 8

"You're kidding me," Ned said, his eyes wide. "Are you *serious*?"

Peter nodded, unable to suppress a smile at Ned's incredulous expression.

Ned lowered his voice to not be overheard in the busy canteen of the school and asked, "You got to fight War Machine?"

"Yeah." Peter sighed. "But he kicked my ass."

"Wow." Ned seemed to think about that for a moment, then he shrugged. "But I guess that's alright. He *is* an Avenger." He grinned. "And you're gonna get trained by him. So I guess that's a win."

Peter nodded with a smile, but it faltered when his eyes found Lisa sitting by herself at a table nearby, headphones covering her ears and her eyes on her cellphone. He shuddered when he remembered her on that bridge, looking down at Roosevelt Island. It would be so easy for her to climb that fence and ...

"Peter."

He startled, his eyes going back to Ned. "What?"

"I said I have to return some books to the library. I'll see you in a few minutes?"

"Oh, I ... yeah, okay."

Ned got up and gathered his things before he left. Peter looked down at his plate. He hadn't eaten even half of his meal, but he didn't feel very hungry. He looked back at Lisa. He hadn't told Ned about finding her on the bridge. It felt wrong to just casually throw it into a conversation. It was hard to get rid of the image, though, and he'd had a nightmare last night about being too late, about seeing her fall and being unable to catch her.

He shuddered and gave up on his lunch.

Slinging his backpack over one shoulder, he picked up his tray and made his way towards the door. He noticed that he would pass right by Lisa and frowned when he saw how sad and exhausted she looked, staring at her phone, not moving at all. It was clear that she was not actually reading anything. She was just hiding, finding an excuse not to look around or at anyone. Peter was familiar with that tactic from middle school.

He wondered whether he should say something. Maybe just something along the lines of 'Hi'. Nothing more. Maybe she'd like that. Maybe it would make her smile.

He slowed his steps as he came closer to her, stopping entirely next to her table. He opened his mouth to say something ... and then caught Flash watching him, grinning widely. His hands clenched around the tray, the words dying in his throat as it closed up, and then Lisa was looking at him, too, her expression annoyed. She moved one of the headphones away from her ear. "What?"

"I ..." Peter swallowed past the nervous lump in his throat. "I'm just ..." He pasted on a quick smile. "Hi. I'm ... I-I'm Peter."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "So?"

"I just ... wanted to say 'Hi'."

Her eyes darkened and her face turned to stone. "Did *they* send you? Are they now *actually* trying to set me up with some *freshman*?" she asked.

Peter swallowed, looking around automatically. "What? Who ... No! No, I ... sorry. I really just wanted to say 'Hi'."

"Right," she replied, doubtful. "Hi." She moved her headphone back over her ear and looked down at the display of her phone, dismissing him.

Peter took a breath, struggling to find words, struggling to utter them past the knot of embarrassment that had formed in his throat. But then she looked back up at him, her blue eyes narrowed suspiciously (*she **hated** him*), and he saw Flash actually *filming* the entire situation and ... he couldn't.

He snapped his mouth shut and left quickly, shakily getting rid of the tray and escaping the canteen. "Idiot," he muttered, brushing an agitated hand through his hair. He hated his stutter and he hated his awkwardness and the stupid anxiety.

Spider-Man wouldn't have had a problem. Hidden behind the mask, he would have had cracked five jokes in the time it had taken Peter to just utter a simple 'Hi'. Lisa would have probably laughed. Or at least not looked at him as if she couldn't trust him, as if he was just another set-up.

He turned a corner and smacked right into somebody else. "Sorry," he muttered before he looked up and found himself staring right at Quentin.

"Look where you're going," he snapped.

Peter ducked his head, scurried around him and, feeling angry and humiliated, found the courage to mutter, "*You* look where you're going."

A hand snatched his backpack, pulling it off his shoulder.

Peter found himself backed against the lockers with one large hand pressing against his sternum. Quentin's eyes had narrowed menacingly. "Care to repeat that?"

Peter reached for his backpack, but Quentin held it too far away.

"You want that back?" He grinned and let go of Peter. "It's rather heavy for a nerd like you."

Then he started to open it.

Panic slammed into Peter and his knees almost gave out.

His suit was in that bag.

"Give that to me," he said. The fear made him sound small and pitiful, but for once, he didn't mind. He *needed* that backpack away from prying hands.

Quentin laughed. "I'm just taking a look."

Peter tried to snatch the backpack, but Quentin turned away, opening it further.

"Give it back!" Peter shouted.

Quentin turned around to him and smiled. Then he changed his grip on the bag and ... he was going to empty it in the middle of the school hallway.

Peter didn't think, not really.

He just had enough common sense left to pull the punch as his fist hit Quentin straight in the face.

Quentin stumbled back and landed on the floor. Snatching his bag out of Quentin's limp fingers, Peter tried to pass him but Quentin got his hand around Peter's ankle and pulled. He let himself fall onto his bag, curling around it protectively when Quentin's hands snatched his shirt and pulled him towards him. "You're gonna pay for this!"

Peter hunched his shoulders, ready to take any kind of beating just as long as his backpack stayed with him, just as long as Quentin – or anybody else – didn't *see* ...

"Parker, O'Donnell!"

Quentin froze immediately and Peter felt his heart skip a beat.

They looked at Principal Morita, who was wearing a thunderous expression. "My office," he said. "Now."

May took a deep breath as they left the school building and stopped on the steps. She brushed one hand through her hair and shook her head before she got the car keys out of her purse and descended the steps towards the sidewalk.

Peter caught up to her, falling into step beside her. "I'm sorry."

She didn't look at him.

"May–"

"We'll talk about it tonight, Peter. I have to get back to work." She turned to look at him then, sadness and disappointment clouding her features. "Just answer me one question: Is he bullying you?"

Peter crossed his arms and ducked his head. "It's ..." He swallowed. "It's nothing I can't handle, May."

"God." She cleared her throat. "You didn't say anything, in there."

Peter shook his head. "Because it wouldn't make a difference."

"*Of course* it would. It would turn the whole thing into self-defense."

"I punched first," he said. "I did."

Brushing loose strands of her dark hair behind her ear, May gave an exasperated sigh. "Peter ..." She trailed off. "Okay." She pulled him close, running her fingers through his hair for a moment. Peter returned the hug, wrapping his arms tightly around her. May pushed him back gently, her

dark eyes giving away that she was upset but trying not to show it. "This isn't over. We'll talk tonight. Understood?"

He nodded. "Yes. Am I ... am I grounded again? From going out, I mean."

"We'll talk later," she repeated.

Peter swallowed and gave a reluctant nod. "Okay."

"I love you."

"Love you, too."

He watched her walk away before heading back inside and slowly making his way to decathlon practice. He would arrive a little early for a change. Because of the lecture he'd received in Morita's office, he'd missed Biology. Ned would only leave the class in another five minutes.

When he passed the corridor leading to Morita's office, he heaved a sigh, suddenly not sure whether he wanted to arrive at decathlon practice early or at all ... not sure how to tell MJ.

"You're both aware that we don't tolerate violence at this school." Morita leaned back in his chair, looking at Peter and Quentin, before turning to May and Quentin's father. "I'm going to give both of them detention for two weeks. They will also be excluded from any upcoming school trips. For Peter, that means the field trip to Philadelphia and for Quentin, football camp."

"Peter!"

He turned to Ned, who was hurrying towards him. MJ was following at a slower pace, her eyes narrowed at Peter suspiciously.

"You weren't in Biology. I heard you punched Quentin?"

Peter nodded.

Ned looked impressed. "How angry was Morita?"

"He was alright," Peter answered. "We got detention and ..." He shifted uncomfortably, sparing an apologetic look at MJ. "... we're banned from upcoming school trips."

Her eyes widened. "You're kidding. No way, Peter."

He sighed. "I'm sorry."

Ned realized the meaning of his words as well, his face falling. "You're not going to Philadelphia with us?"

Peter shook his head.

MJ scoffed. "Couldn't you have kept your raging testosterone in check? God, you're such a loser," she snapped and left for the library, her bag clutched to her chest.

Ned stared after her. "She seemed more upset than she needed to be."

Peter sighed and slumped against the wall.

May was sitting in the breakfast nook when Peter got home, looking at him as he entered. Peter took in her tense shoulders and sad expression and swallowed. She waited until he'd sat down across from her, then she took a breath. "I'm going to just lay it out, okay?"

Peter nodded. "Okay."

She took a breath. "I know ... you miss Ben. I do, too."

Peter shook his head and quickly said, "We don't have to talk about him."

"We're not. We're not talking about Ben, we're talking about *you*, Peter," she answered.

"Something is wrong with you. You barely eat and you always look tired and ... I thought ... I thought, maybe it would get better if I let you go out there again, if I let you ... see Tony." She shook her head. "It's not getting better, though. I feel like it's getting worse." She grasped his hand and pulled gently and Peter slid around the table to sit next to her, leaning into her side, his head on her shoulder and his arms around her waist. "I worry about you." Her fingers ran through his hair. "So, what was today about?"

Peter shrugged. "He tried to get into my backpack."

"Why?"

"For no reason. But I couldn't let him."

May heaved a sigh. "Because you carry that suit around."

He nodded. "Maybe I should wear it underneath my clothes."

May pushed him away gently and he sat up. She was looking at him with raised eyebrows. "Or not take it to school at all."

Peter swallowed. "But I *need* it."

"What for?" she asked. "You're not patrolling after school, are you? We have an agreement that homework comes first."

"But if I see somebody in trouble on my way home, I have to help them."

"Peter, you can't help *everyone*. You're taking on too much and it's starting to get to you. You can't keep this up."

"I have to *try*. Spider-Man can *change* things, May. He's strong and he can help people."

"I know," May whispered, "but he's also only fifteen and I hate the thought of him being out there because he's my baby and he's not invincible." She took a shuddering breath and got up, gathering the take-out menus from the fridge. "Whatever I do, it's wrong. I can't send you out there and I can't make you stop. What I want doesn't matter." She set the menus down on the table. "Your pick," she said and sat down again with a tired sigh, this time across from him. She looked disappointed.

Peter fiddled with the menus, unsure what to say. "I'm ... I'm sorry," he whispered.

"You're always sorry, Peter," she replied, then she sighed and smiled sadly. "I'm not angry at you for wanting to help. You're so much like Ben, taking on everybody's problems and heaping them onto your own shoulders. You couldn't be more his son if you were actually his own." The thought

made Peter's throat tighten and the corner of his eyes prickle with tears. She took his hand and squeezed. "It's just ... after he died, I thought I'd be able to do this on my own, raising a teenager. The two of us, as a team." Her smile dimmed, turning from sad to painful. "I'm not *just* raising a teenager anymore, though. Sometimes, I wonder whether I can give you everything you need."

"Doesn't matter," Peter answered, grasping her hands tightly. "I'll be fine. And we're still a team." He forced a smile. "Promise."

She smiled at him, their hands entwined on the kitchen table, and for a moment, everything was alright.

Chapter 9

Chapter by [JolinarJackson](#)

Chapter 9

F.R.I.D.A.Y. announced Peter's arrival long before his feet hit the roof garden of Tony's penthouse. Tony didn't make the effort to get up to meet him, instead waiting for Peter to enter the living room and find Tony sitting on the couch with his feet up and a tablet computer in his hands. "Hey, kid."

Peter pulled his mask off, his dark hair standing up at odd ends. He gave Tony a bright smile. "Hey, Mr. Stark."

"Broke the suit again?"

"No." Peter just stood there for a moment, his hands wringing the mask nervously, then he said, "I'd just like to talk about your offer."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "Which one?"

"The one with the training? Is it ... still ... would you still wanna organize that?"

"Sure." Tony opened his calendar on the tablet computer, browsing through it. "It's just going to be difficult to find a time-slot in the next few weeks. Maybe I can shift something around just before Christmas. I'll let you know."

"No," Peter said quickly and stepped closer. "I mean ... you're still free *this* weekend, right?"

"Well, you said you can't make it, so technically, yes."

"I *can* make it ... now, I mean. I can make it now. Plans changed. No biggie." He gave a nervous smile.

Tony frowned and got up from the couch, approaching Peter slowly. "No biggie?" he asked suspiciously. "What about your trip to Philly?"

Peter's cheeks flushed and he gave a shrug, his head ducking. "I'm not going," he muttered.

Tony raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Implying that the rest of the team still is. Why?"

Peter wouldn't look him in the eyes. "Is that important?"

"No, I'm just curious," Tony answered.

Peter heaved a sigh, clearly undecided about whether to tell Tony at all, but then he grimaced. "I got banned."

Tony crossed his arms. "Why?"

"Fighting."

"Fighting," Tony repeated. He nodded slowly. "Right." Clearing his throat, he went over to the bar and reached for the bottle of scotch he'd opened an hour ago. His fingers hesitated when they met

the glass, though, and then slid away to open the mini-fridge instead, taking out a can of coke.
"Was there a reason?"

Peter pulled his shoulders up, his fingers clenching in the mask. "It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?"

"Mr. Stark, it's ... sorry, but it's not ... it's none of your business."

Tony froze and Peter's eyes widened as he seemed to realize what he'd said. And to whom.

"It's just ... I-I ... patrol. I ..."

He clenched his eyes shut and turned away. Tony gave him a moment, taking a sip from the can. Peter turned back around, having composed himself. "What I meant is, it's got nothing to do with ... with Spider-Man, so it's not ..."

He let out a breath, defeated. "... your area."

Tony nodded slowly. "Not my area," he said thoughtfully, walking towards Peter. "Did you punch the other kid?"

Peter's shoulders slumped.

"Did you?"

"Yes."

"You're aware that you pack the strength of a truck if you want to and that you are as of yet unable to properly control your strength during a fight?"

Peter ducked his head. "Yes," he answered softly.

"Still not my area?"

Peter looked up at him. "I'm sorry, Mr. Stark. I ... I just meant ..."

Tony sighed and shook his head. "Why'd you punch him?"

Peter looked at him and his eyes seemed wet in the gentle lights, for just a second, then he blinked and it was gone. "It was stupid."

"Kid-"

"I don't have to tell you," Peter said and Tony felt a stab at the rebuttal, his own words from a few days ago used against him.

He nodded. "Okay."

Peter seemed to notice that he was taken aback and his expression shifted into guilt. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine." Tony tried a smile but it felt painful. "Not my area." He cleared his throat. "I'll pick you up on Saturday, let's say around nine."

"Okay. Um ... I'm sure May'd like to talk to you about the whole thing?"

Tony nodded. "I'll give her a call."

The party had been Ned's idea. He'd asked Peter during school, his mind about Peter's answer already made up.

"So I asked whether you could come, too, and Wes said everyone's welcome. His parents have this huge house and they're away on a business trip and they won't come home before Tuesday. And he's got a pool."

Peter grimaced and threw a pointed look at the drizzle falling outside the window. "It's freezing outside."

Ned rolled his eyes. "An indoor pool, Peter."

He hesitated. "I can't slack off patrol."

"You went on patrol yesterday. Today's Friday. Come on, man, this is gonna be awesome."

Peter had given in. Mainly because he knew that May would like it if he went. Guilt about missing out on patrol lingered, though, and he had almost talked himself out of going to the party at all when Ned was already ringing the doorbell to pick him up.

At that point, Peter didn't really have a choice.

Ned had been right about the house, though. It *was* huge and it seemed as if the whole school was present, even though Peter knew that, realistically, it was probably only their year.

It was fine, at first.

He managed to avoid Flash and Quentin was nowhere to be seen, so Peter allowed himself to relax a little. It was when Ned went off to answer a phone call from his mother that the night went downhill.

Peter was in the spacious kitchen of the house, getting a coke and pondering whether to open one of the bags of Doritos piled up on the counter, when two girls walked in.

"You're *not* serious," one of them said with wide eyes, snatching a can of lemonade.

Her friend shrugged. "I *just* heard it. It's on Facebook."

"Lisa Greene? I don't think I knew her."

"She was one year above us."

Peter stilled. They didn't seem to actually notice him, only giving him a short glance before going through the selection of pizzas on offer.

"So what happened?"

"She jumped off Queensboro Bridge last night."

Peter's heart skipped a beat, his chest tightened. He stepped back, leaning against the fridge.

"Right over Roosevelt Island apparently. Probably wanted to make sure it would work."

"Wow."

"Yeah, she must've been dead immediately."

Nausea was crawling up Peter's throat, his hands feeling numb. The clatter of his can of coke against the floor caught the attention of the girls again, but only for a second.

"Crazy, isn't it?"

Their voices and steps faded away, but everything else suddenly became louder: the music, the laughter, the chatting, the sound of feet dancing and walking, the smell of sweet soft drinks and popcorn and chips and ... Peter pushed away from the fridge and turned, his sneakers slightly sticky from the coke he'd spilled and his shaky hands barely able to find the handle of the backdoor. He stumbled outside and heard the door slam closed. The night air seemed cold as ice against his skin and he just fell, huddling on the ground with his hands over his ears and his eyes squeezed shut, his breaths coming in sharp pants. "Oh God."

Queensboro Bridge. He was there yesterday. He'd crossed it on his way to Mr. Stark.

"I shouldn't have ...," he muttered. His breath left him shakily and he felt his eyes burn, tear tracks hot against his cheeks. He wiped his eyes and gasped for air, clenching one hand in the grass and the other against his own chest, trying to catch a breath.

He couldn't panic, he couldn't panic, not now, not here ...

... he shouldn't have left her that night he accompanied her to the train station, he should have talked to her in the canteen, he shouldn't have been so eager to get to Mr. Stark, shouldn't have ignored what was going on around him as he crossed the bridge ...

*... he knew she wasn't doing well. He **knew!***

A hand closed around his and he felt it being pressed against someone else's chest. He blinked but it was almost dark out here and his sight was blurry from tears. He didn't recognize the shadow hovering in front of him.

It wasn't Ned, though.

But their chest was moving in calm breaths and he managed to close his eyes and pace himself, fall into the same pattern, the rushing noise in his ears reducing. Slowly, he opened his eyes and now, he recognized MJ kneeling in front of him, her eyebrows knit and her dark eyes staring at him searchingly. "You have panic attacks?"

Peter stared at her. "I ..." He swallowed. "Yeah, it's ... too many people, loud music ..."

"News about Lisa's suicide?"

He jolted, his eyes widening.

She sighed, sounding exasperated. "I was in the kitchen. I saw your reaction."

"You were ... there?"

"Didn't notice me?" She shrugged. "It's fine, nobody does." She shifted and let go of his hand. He belatedly realized that he had still been pressing it against her chest and felt his cheeks heat. MJ didn't seem to notice. She looked towards the house, the soft illumination spilling out the windows casting shadows underneath her eyes like bruises. "She was bullied," she said. "That's why she did it. Left a Facebook post and everything before ..."

Peter closed his eyes, pulling his shoulders up. The image of Lisa on that bridge, looking down,

appeared in his mind unbidden. It wasn't difficult to imagine her climb the chain-link fence and just ... fall.

"You know, that's the crappy thing about the system." MJ's voice was steady and Peter clung to it. "The teachers are making such a fuss about zero tolerance for bullies and all, but she went to them and she told them and they didn't do a thing. Or not enough. Our school provides a safe environment for students to thrive? It's all fake." She looked at him. "You should know."

He startled. "What?"

"Quentin."

Peter's shoulders slumped. He didn't try to deny it. MJ had a knack for knowing things and she never said something she wasn't absolutely certain was correct. He shook his head and avoided her eyes. "I can handle it."

"Really?"

The doubt in her voice sparked anger in his. "Why would you care?"

She stared at him. "We're friends."

"Are we?" he asked. "Are we really? Because you barely talk more to me or Ned than before and I don't remember getting closer to you. All I *do* remember is you just ... deciding one day that we should be friends. And that was it."

MJ was still looking at him steadily, but hurt was clouding her features now. "I never said I'm good at it."

He sighed and rubbed his face, his anger fading. "I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't have ..."

"Whatever, nice to know how you really feel."

"MJ-"

"Peter," Ned interrupted suddenly, crouching next to him. "Dude, are you okay?"

"No," Peter answered and looked at him. "I want to leave."

"Okay," Ned said.

MJ had faded away without Peter even noticing. He felt bad for snapping at her, knowing that she definitely hadn't deserved it. Since he had no idea what to say to make things better, though, it was probably for the best that she was gone. He would make it up to her next week, after her return from Philadelphia. That would give him time to figure out what to say.

Carefully, Ned helped Peter up. He looked strangely worried, his hand hovering by Peter's elbow.

Peter wondered vaguely what he must look like to warrant that reaction.

He got his answer when they passed a mirror in the hallway. While Ned was busy finding their coats in the pile, Peter looked at himself, noticing how shaky his hands were, how dark the shadows under his eyes seemed against the pallor of his skin. The loud noises of the party around them set him on edge, his teeth grinding and a headache forming.

"Here we go," Ned said, handing Peter his coat and then leading him to the door quickly.

Ned phoned his mother while they were walking down the driveway and she agreed to come and pick them up. It would still take her about twenty minutes to reach them, so Peter and Ned sat on the edge of the sidewalk, in the dimmest area between two street lights. The neighborhood was quiet, compiled of houses just like the one Wes lived in. There weren't even cars driving by, no dogs barking. The only sounds to be heard were those of the party going on behind them and even those seemed oddly muffled.

After a while, Ned asked carefully, "What happened?"

Peter looked at him, undecided whether he should answer truthfully.

Ned seemed to notice his hesitation. "Come on, man, you look dead on your feet."

Sighing deeply, Peter brushed a hand through his hair. "It's about ... it's about Lisa."

"The girl who ..." Ned trailed off. "I just heard, yeah."

"I knew her," Peter said softly.

Ned's eyes widened. "What? Oh sh- ... dude ... how?"

"Not as *me*," Peter said. "As *him*." Peter crossed his arms. "I ... met her twice. She told me ... *him* ... she was being bullied."

"What did you do?" Ned asked.

He shook his head. "Not enough." He sighed and blinked away tears. "Nothing." He cleared his throat and swallowed the tears. "Last time I saw her, I thought ... maybe she was going to be okay." He took a breath. "But she wasn't. I didn't see it, I just ... left her."

"It's not your fault." Ned stared at him earnestly. "If she *wanted* to be left alone."

"I shouldn't have left her alone."

"Peter, there was nothing you could have done. You weren't the problem. Don't think that."

Peter shrugged, wiping his hands over his face tiredly. "It's hard not to."

The street outside Peter's window was quiet, street lights shining gently, throwing shadows into Peter's room. He'd left his own lights off to be able to look outside better. He checked his watch again, noting, *again*, that it was way past his curfew, three in the morning. A cold breeze crept inside through the crack he'd opened the window and he shivered in his pajama pants and t-shirt. A dog started to bark and Peter tensed, his hands grabbing the windowsill, but the barking stopped and no further sounds drifted towards him. The street remained quiet. He leaned his forehead against the window and breathed, his breath fogging up the glass.

A knock sounded on his bedroom door but he didn't turn when it opened and light spilled in from the hallway. "Hey," May said softly. "I thought I heard you moving around."

"You're still up", he said.

"I got up for a glass of water." He heard her step closer. "Why are *you* up?"

Peter closed his eyes for a long moment. "I'm not going out."

"You want to, though."

He pressed his lips together. "Well, I can't because of your stupid curfew."

"Peter." Her voice was reprimanding.

He sighed, feeling chastened and guilty. He'd already snapped at MJ for no reason, he hadn't intended to snap at May, too. "I'm sorry."

"What for?" she asked and for a moment, it was almost like Ben was standing beside her.

"I don't accept your apology if you don't know what you're apologizing for."

Peter ducked his head. "I didn't mean to snap at you."

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her long hair brushing his cheek. "But you meant what you said."

"The curfew *is* stupid."

He could hear her laugh gently and she pressed a kiss into his hair. "Did something happen at the party? You were quiet when you came home."

Biting his lip, he felt his eyes burn, his throat feeling tight.

"Sweetheart," she said, maybe because she could see his eyes well in the reflection of the window or maybe because she felt his chest hitch. She turned him around and wrapped him into an embrace. "What's wrong?"

He sobbed and the release felt like he had been holding on to this for hours and maybe he had. Even though he had shed a few tears once he'd been home, he had still tried to be quiet about it, not wanting May to know that he was crying. Not wanting her to know what had happened. Out of guilt, out of shame. He knew, though, that he wouldn't be able to lie to her about it anymore now and on some level, he didn't really want to. His arms went around her and pulled her as close as possible, his head tucked against her neck and her fingers in his hair. "I wasn't there. I could have been, but I wasn't."

"What?"

"And she died."

She tightened her hold and Peter felt her shudder, her breathing becoming uneven. "Peter--"

"She *died* because I wasn't there and I should have been. I should have been *there*."

She pushed him back to look at him, her hands framing his face. She was looking for an explanation and he drew a breath, wiping his eyes.

"There was this girl, Lisa. I met her on patrol and she ... she basically told me that she was thinking about ... about killing herself."

May's thumb brushed tears from his cheek.

"And she did. And I must have swung right past her on my way to Mr. Stark. Maybe she even thought I'd be there to stop her. Maybe she was waiting for me. But I didn't stop. I was too busy thinking about the Avengers training and--"

"Peter." She shook her head. "Don't."

"Spider-Man let her down, May. I thought I was doing good, at least being him, but I guess I-"

"*Don't.*" Her grip around his head tightened. "You have to stop carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders."

He stepped away from her. "But I can *stop* these things, May. That's why I go out there. It's not for fun, I don't do it for kicks, I thought I could *help* people. And now I'm this ... I wanted to go and see Mr. Stark before I had to come home and I hurried and I didn't look around me. And tonight, I went to a party and I could have spent the time helping people and I just ... I feel like I'm *wasting time*-"

"Peter, *stop.*" She put her hands on her hips, her eyes narrowed. "You're *not* wasting time when you spend it taking care of yourself. Studying, going to parties, meeting friends, resting. Going out as Spider-Man is important, yes, but you can only be good as him if you're healthy and happy. You're not responsible for the whole of New York 24/7. You *can't* be. Remember what I said about studying?"

He did. He did remember what she'd told him in middle school, when he'd been stressed out about getting a spot at Midtown High. He looked at her miserably. "That I shouldn't overdo it."

"Yes. I know you're trying *so hard*, sweetheart, but you're trying so hard in so many aspects of your life. School, Spider-Man, taking care of me. Give yourself a break every once in a while." She sighed and pulled him back into her arms. "Use the weekend to get away a bit. Talk to Tony, figure out a balance. I'm sure he can chip in with some experience or advice."

Peter shook his head, pushing away from her and crossing his arms. "I'm not going."

"What?"

"I canceled."

"Why?"

He ducked his head. The need to go out there, to do as much as he could ... it had been impossible to even consider leaving the city, wasting almost two days and one night that he could spend actually *doing* something.

May understood without him needing to say it. She nodded slowly and crossed her arms. "Peter, I ..." She heaved a breath. "Peter, I don't like this. You can't ... handle this."

"I can handle it!" He wiped his eyes angrily. "I just need to be better." His shoulders slumped. "I can be better."

May combed her fingers through his hair and pulled him into another hug.

Chapter 10

Chapter by [JolinarJackson](#)

Chapter 10

"Boss," F.R.I.D.A.Y. said, "Mrs. Parker is on the line for you."

Tony looked up from the news he was reading on his tablet computer. He still wasn't quite used to the idea of May being in touch with him on a regular basis. There weren't many people who had his private number. Even Peter could only call him directly by using the suit. May, however, had made it one of her ultimatums for continuing to let Peter go out as Spider-Man to have Tony's number on hand and he had given in. "Yeah, patch her through." He sipped on his coffee while he waited for the tell-tale click of F.R.I.D.A.Y. doing so before he asked, "May, what's wrong?"

One thing was for sure: May would never call just to chat.

He pulled up the system diagnostics and live feed from Peter's suit on the tablet computer while May answered, *"Tony, I'm sorry for calling so early."*

"That's fine, I was awake anyway. Is Peter alright? His suit is inactive so I guess he's not in trouble as Spider-Man, is he?"

She sighed. *"No, not exactly. He told me that he canceled the trip to the compound this weekend."*

Tony nodded. He'd received the voice mail via Happy first thing this morning. He'd been surprised, considering how excited Peter had been at the prospect of training at the compound. He'd been planning on calling him later in the day to reconfirm. "Yeah, something about an essay in History."

It was quiet for a long moment.

"May?"

"It's not quite that."

He stilled. "What is it?"

"He ... this kid jumped off a bridge and Peter thinks he's responsible. Because he wasn't there to stop it."

Tony closed his eyes and slumped in his chair, brushing one hand through his hair. "Crap. When did that happen?"

"The day before yesterday. He was on his way to you. He thinks he ... neglected his duties."

Tony wasn't quite sure what to answer. On one hand, he'd known that Peter would be confronted with having somebody die on what he considered his watch at some point in time. On the other hand, he'd hoped it wouldn't happen this soon. "That's terrible."

"I thought ... Tony, I think he might need you to talk to him. Get ... get another hero's perspective. Get ..." She sighed. *"Listen, I don't like saying this because I'm not exactly ... convinced that you're the best influence for my kid."*

He rolled his eyes, muttering, "Gee, thanks."

"But he looks up to you. He has since you announced that you're Iron Man."

Tony released a breath. "May, he ... listen, you're the most important person for him."

"I know that." She sounded annoyed. "Do you really think I don't? But Peter's ..." She hesitated. "I know he listens to me when I talk but ... some things, he might have to hear from you. And not being too hard on yourself when you think you failed to save someone might just be one of those things." She took a breath. "You equipped my kid to fight the kind of battles he isn't ready for and now he thinks that he needs to be able to walk in your shoes, but ... he's still a child and he's sensitive. You can't treat him like an adult, expecting him to deal with the hard things himself. He needs more from you than training and updates. You said you'd mentor him."

Tony shook his head. "I am."

"Then do your job!"

Tony fiddled with his coffee mug. "I just think," he said carefully, "that he would've told me if he'd wanted me to know about it."

"You don't know him at all, do you?" May asked.

The words hurt.

Tony swallowed. "Okay, I'll come by in a couple of hours."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

She hung up with that and Tony sighed deeply. "F.R.I.D.A.Y.," he said, "pull up reports on suicides in New York two nights ago. Narrow it down to minors."

"One match in Hell's Kitchen and one in Queens."

"Disregard Hell's Kitchen."

"Exactly one match left, boss. Lisa Greene."

Tony nodded slowly and got up from his chair. "Send the info down to my workshop."

"Mr. Stark," Peter said, his eyes wide in surprise as he opened the door.

"Hey, kid," Tony answered.

"I ..." Peter hesitated and nervously stepped to stand mostly behind the door as if he was self-conscious about the sweatpants and the oversized t-shirt he was wearing. His hair was askew and he was barefoot. He looked as if he'd just gotten up but the dark shadows under his eyes testified that he had probably barely slept last night. "I can't make it this weekend, Mr. Stark. I left you a message."

Tony took off his sunglasses and pocketed them. "Because of a History essay?"

"Yes. I have to do research and put it all together and-"

"Good thing that Wikipedia lives at the compound. Vision will help with the research, you can use one of the computers to type the thing up and in-between, we get a bit of training in." A door to the apartment behind him closed and Tony turned, smiling at the young woman who stared at him in disbelief with her key half-way to the lock of her door. He cleared his throat and looked back at Peter. "Would you mind letting me in? I don't want to cause a scene."

Peter hesitated for only a short moment before he opened the door wider and let Tony step inside. Tony hadn't been to the new apartment yet. He knew that the Parkers had moved a couple of months ago, but he hadn't had the chance yet to have a look. It was smaller, only a few steps leading Tony into the kitchen which was directly connected to the living room. May was putting dishes in the dishwasher and gave him a quick smile as he entered.

He cleared his throat. "This is the new place?" he said, unnecessarily. "It's ... cozy."

"Mr. Stark, I ..." Peter was moving around him, wringing his hands nervously. "As I said, I-I really can't make it this weekend, but-but we can ... we can reschedule. Like, how about ..." He consulted a calendar stuck to the fridge.

"I'm not really here about the training," Tony said.

Peter stared at him questioningly but then his eyes widened and he turned to May, who was watching them silently. When Peter spoke, it was with calm resignation. "You told him?"

She met his eyes. "You weren't going to."

He stared at her. Something like betrayal settled on his face.

Tony looked at May. "Give us a minute?"

"Sure, I'll ..." She picked up a garbage bag. "I'll take this down."

Tony waited until the door had fallen shut, then he said, "Yes, we ganged up on you. It's very unfair." He sank onto the couch and patted the empty seat beside him. "Come here for a minute."

Peter crossed his arms but he obeyed, settling beside Tony stiffly.

Tony heaved a breath. "So, I could give you a speech about responsibility and power and all that jazz but I think you don't need that. So I'm going to jump to the end of my speech: You didn't kill that girl."

Peter didn't look at him. "No. I just let it happen."

Tony nodded slowly. "You knew she was going to go on that bridge at that exact time in that exact night and jump? Or did you see it happen? Did you watch and do nothing?"

Peter didn't answer.

"Because if you did, then yes, you let it happen. But if you didn't, then her death is tragic and sad but not your responsibility."

Peter shook his head and finally looked at Tony miserably. "I met her before that night. She was ... she was thinking about it. I knew she was."

Tony poked his shoulder with a finger. "And what did you do?"

"I brought her to the train station. I should have kept watch on that bridge. I should have checked

on her.”

”Because you felt responsible for her?”

”Yes.”

”You feel responsible for the people out there? Queens?”

Peter nodded. ”Yes.”

Tony sighed deeply and shifted, sitting so that he was facing Peter with one arm stretched over the backrest of the couch. ”2.3,” he said.

Peter looked at him questioningly. ”What?”

”2.3 million people live in Queens.” Tony tilted his head. ”I’ll give you another number: 35 thousand.”

”I don’t-”

”That’s the amount of crimes reported in Queens per year. Well, an estimate.”

Peter stared at him.

Tony returned the look earnestly. ”Your shoulders are not that broad, kid. Nobody’s are.”

Peter’s eyes grew wet and he ducked his head, his voice wavering when he replied, ”But I knew she wasn’t well.”

”You did all you could.” Tony caught Peter’s eyes. ”You go out there and whatever crosses your path, you take care of it. But you can’t be everywhere. You can’t see everything. And you can’t protect everyone.”

Peter opened his mouth, as if to argue but no words came forth. Tony saw him tense and then he released a breath. It sounded shaky.

”I know,” Tony said softly. ”It’s tough. It’s disappointing.” He put a hand on Peter’s shoulder, his thumb drawing circles. He felt Peter stiffen and quickly took his hand away, trying not to feel rejected. ”It’s good that you feel that way, believe me. I’d be worried if you weren’t affected. But don’t let it destroy you.” He paused for a moment and then asked, ”You want to go out tonight, right? That’s why you don’t want to leave.”

Peter nodded hesitantly.

Tony got up and put his sunglasses back on. ”Okay.” He tugged his jacket into place. ”We reschedule.”

”Thank you.”

”That’s alright. I know how it feels to need to try and make things right.” He turned to leave but paused in the door. ”Peter,” he said and waited for him to look at him, ”next time, just tell me the truth. I can ... I can actually help.”

He turned away before Peter could react and left through the door. May was just coming up the stairs as he was leaving.

"He's gonna be okay," Tony said.

"Thank you," she said. "For coming by. I know he ... didn't want me to tell you."

"Yeah," Tony said. He wanted to walk on but stopped. "May."

She turned back around to him.

"Is Peter planning on going to college?"

She frowned in confusion. "I ... what? Why do you ask?"

"I was talking about it with him the other day but he wasn't ... he shut me down."

Her eyebrows raised. "He did?"

"Pretty much."

She smiled slightly and crossed her arms. "Don't take it personally. He was probably embarrassed." She stepped closer again. "Peter was planning on going to college when Ben was still alive. That's the last time we really talked about it, anyway. Financially, we have been in a tight spot recently and he noticed. Thinking about paying for college might just be ... difficult for him."

"Do you need money?" Tony asked.

May smiled weakly. "These days, I always need money."

"How much?" Tony asked, getting his checkbook out.

May's eyes widened. "Oh no. No, no, no." She took the checkbook from him and slapped his shoulder with it, shaking her head vehemently. "That is not going to happen."

"You need money, I have it."

"We're not your charity case," May replied. She held the checkbook out to him. "Thank you but no."

"For Peter's education, then-"

"Tony ..." She took a deep breath. "No. Please."

Tony heaved a sigh, feeling his frustration bubbling over. "I'm trying to help."

"I know. I know. But ... I can't accept that." She shook her head. "This isn't ... your responsibility."

He took the checkbook and nodded slowly. "Okay." Shaking his head, he turned to leave.

"Tony," May said and he paused, looking back at her. "There *is* something you could do."

He nodded. "Okay."

May released a breath, as if bracing herself. "You know I ... I was being serious: Don't take it personally when Peter doesn't talk to you about ... about things that worry him. He doesn't tell me everything either. Or Ned. He just ... tries to be what he thinks people need him to be, putting on a

brave face. It's been like that from the start. Maybe because of his parents' death. I don't know.” She sighed. “Ben was really good at making him talk, though, saw right through him. Peter would always go to him with his troubles.”

”Ben is gone,” Tony said.

May nodded, tears entering her eyes. ”That's the problem,” she said with a shaky smile. “I think Peter hasn't managed to get over that, yet. Not that I expect him to but ...” She looked at him earnestly. “I know you don't have much time and I know there are more important things out there for you to handle but ... he might need you at some point in time. He might want to open up to you. And I need you to listen if that happens.”

Tony frowned. ”What about me being a bad influence?”

May pressed her lips together and crossed her arms. ”I could tell him not to see you but what good would that do me? We have to make *this*,” she gestured between them, ”work. Somehow.” She cleared her throat. ”So ... should he come to you ...”

Tony nodded slowly. ”Of course.” He sighed, letting his shoulders slump a bit, relaxing muscles that had been tense during the entire exchange. “Of course I'll listen.”

May released a breath. She seemed almost relieved, as if she hadn't been sure what he'd answer. ”Okay.”

”Okay.”

She turned to go and he took that as his cue, starting down the stairs again.

”Oh, Tony,” she said when she was almost out of sight. He leaned to be able to look up at her. Her expression was hard, determined. ”Don't mess my kid up or I'll come after you.” With that, she vanished, her steps fading away.

Tony stared at the spot she'd just occupied, his lips quirking into a smile. ”Yeah,” he said, “I'm starting to grow on her.”

The rubble was pressing down on his chest, into his sides, onto his legs, trapping him in the dark, his lungs barely able to expand enough to draw a proper breath. “Help, please! I'm down here! I'm down here, I'm stuck! I'm stuck, I can't move! I can't ...” His breath left him and then there was water crashing down on him and he couldn't swim to the surface, he couldn't breathe. He couldn't ...

Peter gasped awake, his hand clenching in his sheets and his heartbeat heavy in his chest. He gulped in air and switched on the small lamp next to his bed, grounding himself with the view of his room. His hair was matted to his forehead with sweat and he shivered, pulling the blanket up and around his shoulders to ward off the chill of the night.

As his breathing slowly returned to normal, he looked at the suit hanging over the back of the chair where he'd left it after patrol. He'd been out all afternoon and early evening, returning to have dinner with May upon her insistence and going back out when she left for another late-night shift of research. Peter had stayed out until just after three in the morning. It was a clear break of May's curfew but she still hadn't been home when Peter had returned.

His secret was safe.

Peter had stopped several muggings, one car thief and brought a five-year-old home who had planned to run away to teach his parents a lesson, he'd stopped a bank robbery before it could even start and talked to a couple of police officers for a while, trying to establish himself as an ally rather than a menace. It had been a good night.

It didn't feel like enough.

His shoulder ached. It was a throbbing pain from deep within and he pressed his fingertips into the muscle underneath the scar, hissing a breath when that only made it worse.

... the talon came down, piercing skin and muscle. Peter cried out in pain while Toomes loomed over him ...

He shook the memory off. Sometimes, he thought the pain the scar caused him would never fully leave.

Peter curled up on his side and closed his eyes, trying to go back to sleep for at least an hour.

He didn't.

Chapter 11

Chapter by [JolinarJackson](#)

Chapter Notes

Guys, please heed the warnings regarding violence and bullying. There's nothing too graphic, but this chapter might still be trigger-y for some people.

That being said, thank you to everyone who is reading this story and leaving kudos and especially to everyone who is commenting. I know it's a tough topic but you are seriously making my days! :)

Chapter 11

It was quarter past eleven the next night when Peter received the call.

He was just sitting perched on top of a building near Costco at Queens Boulevard, keeping a watchful eye out on his surroundings. Karen didn't even bother asking him whether he wanted to accept the call, she just announced that Mr. Stark was on the line and already, Peter was connected. Sometimes, he wondered whether Mr. Stark had programmed Karen to always put him through.

Peter was aware that it was a school night, that he was out past his curfew. He could hazard a guess at the reason for Mr. Stark's call. Nevertheless, he tried to remain casual when he greeted, "Hey, Mr. Stark."

"Hey?" Mr. Stark asked. *"Have you checked your watch recently?"*

Peter sighed.

"It's Sunday, you've got school tomorrow," Mr. Stark continued. *"You're late. May'll be worried."*

"May's at work."

"Peter, the curfew is also valid when she's not there. As evidenced by the fact that I get an alarm if you don't go home on time."

It was quiet for a long moment. Peter didn't know what to say and there was the rustling of fabric on Mr Stark's side, as if he was shifting back and forth uncomfortably.

"Don't think I don't know you were home late yesterday as well. What's going on, kid? You've been good about this up until now."

Peter ducked his head. "I'm just ... I'm fine, Mr. Stark. It's just ... crime's happening after eleven and-

"2.3, 35 thousand, remember?" Mr. Stark asked.

Peter sighed in defeat. "Yeah."

"Yeah. Go home. I won't ask again. This remains between us but I won't hesitate to get May to yell at you if it happens again."

"Fine," Peter said, "I'm going."

"Kid," Mr. Stark answered before he could disconnect, *"are you okay?"*

Peter couldn't tell him that he was dreading to go to school on Monday. That he was dreading to be there alone, without Ned. That he was dreading to face Quentin after what had happened with Lisa. That the chinks in his armor had grown bigger, that he was scared it would give away under the onslaught.

That he wasn't sure what would happen if it did.

"I just need a bit of sleep, Mr. Stark. I'm fine."

He wasn't.

But Mr. Stark – *Iron Man* – didn't need to know that. Iron Man needed to know that he could count on Spider-Man. No matter what. He didn't need to know that Peter Parker was scared of a guy he could easily lift off his feet, if he only tried. No, Quentin didn't have anything to do with Spider-Man. He was Peter Parker's problem. So he didn't say anything.

Peter went home as promised and he went to bed.

But he didn't sleep.

The school was strangely quiet on Monday. When Peter walked to his locker, he passed by one which was decorated with flowers and a picture of Lisa. He stopped to stare at it, clamping down on the need to turn and leave.

"It's so crazy," somebody said and Peter noticed the girls he'd seen bully Lisa just a few days ago look at her locker from their place leaning against the wall nearby.

"Seriously. It's so tragic. I cried all weekend."

Peter ducked his head and walked on, hurrying past them. Ned didn't meet him at his locker this morning. He was still in Philadelphia, scheduled to return late this afternoon. As was MJ. Being alone put him on edge, even though he would never willingly admit to it. Besides Ned, Peter didn't really have any friends. Besides the decathlon team, he didn't really interact with anyone much. He felt strangely vulnerable and alone.

Then, just when History started, he received a message from Ned and couldn't help but smile slightly at the screen.

Are you ok?

Was he okay? Peter bit his lip and pulled his shoulders up, his feet tucked underneath the chair. He was tired, mainly. He'd tried to sleep but the short rest he'd managed to get had been interrupted by another nightmare about Lisa and Toomes.

Quentin was looking at him, from his place two rows in front of him, chewing a pen lazily, grinning whenever Peter met his eyes. There was a bruise around his left eye where Peter had hit

him on Thursday, almost faded by now. Peter quickly averted his eyes and clenched his hands around the phone to avoid fiddling nervously. His shoulder ached and his mouth felt dry, the taste of sand and ash on his tongue. He shook himself before he could get lost in the memory. A panic attack was the last thing he wanted to have at school.

Not really, he texted back.

Ned sent him a sad emoji. *I'm back tonight. Wanna catch a movie?*

A movie meant loud sounds, bright lights and Peter felt nauseous just thinking about it. His senses had already felt on the verge of being in overdrive for the last two days, the sounds around him sharper, the lights brighter. He knew it was a side effect of him being stressed out and working on next to no sleep. He didn't think he'd be able to stomach a movie. Besides, it would mean being away from the streets for up to three hours, past his curfew. It meant not being able to go out tonight. So he just answered, *Patrol*.

Ok. Stay safe, man.

"Peter."

He startled and looked up into Mrs. Wainwright's disapproving stare.

"Get off your phone or you can pick it up at the Principal's office this afternoon."

There was a low round of giggling heard around the class.

"Sorry," Peter said, flushing, and dropped the phone into his backpack.

Wainwright frowned at him. "Are you feeling okay, Peter?"

"Yeah. Sure."

She looked at him for a moment longer, assessing, and then turned towards the tv. "As I was saying," she continued, "recent events have caused the decision to show this video to all students. I know you're all aware of what it says but I think that it can't be shown too often."

She pressed *Play* and just one moment later, none other than Captain America was smiling at them gently.

"Hi, I'm Captain America. Today, I'd like to talk about bullies and why we have to fight them."

There was a huff of breath, laughter disguised as a cough, coming from Quentin. Peter pulled his shoulders up and his legs closer, curling in on himself.

*"There are many ways of bullying and it is very harmful for those who are its victims. Whether someone is being shoved, insulted or just ignored by peers – all these things are already signs that bullying is in progress. It needs to be stopped. And **you** can do it."*

Quentin turned to look at him. A shudder ran up Peter's spine, his heart rate picking up and his muscles tensing automatically, ready to fight. Quentin looked forwards again.

"I'm counting on you," Captain America said and the screen went black.

Peter wiped a hand over his eyes and shook his head, taking a deep breath to calm down. His head hurt, his eyes burning in the bright lights of the room, his ears picking up on every breath, every shuffle of paper ... he ducked down, burying his head in his arms, and hoped that Mrs. Wainwright

would forget about him.

The longer the day wore on, the more sensitive Peter's senses became. He developed a raging headache during lunchtime and had to leave the canteen to avoid the noise in there. He didn't raise his hand once during the afternoon classes and spent detention at the desk farthest away from Quentin, with his face buried in his arms and his eyes closed. All he wanted was to go home and lie down and sleep ... he knew, though, that he couldn't. He had to get as much patrol in as possible before his curfew.

It had seemed like a good idea to spend the time he couldn't sleep at night out on patrol. To save as many people as he possibly could, to do as much as he could. But now that Mr. Stark was on his case and there was no hiding Peter's late hours from him, he couldn't even do that. It bothered Peter a bit that Mr. Stark was keeping an eye on his curfew. He'd thought that he would trust him more by now, see him more as an equal.

Apparently, he had been wrong.

Peter sighed as he washed his hands and shook off the water. This particular school bathroom was always out of paper towels. Peter didn't pay much attention at first when the door behind him opened, but then his muscles tensed of their own volition and a shudder ran up his spine, and he looked up to see Quentin standing just inside the door. Peter took a deep breath, nerves settling in his stomach like a lead weight.

"I heard you were at that party on Friday," Quentin said, leaning against the wall. "I would've been, too, but go figure: I was grounded for causing trouble at school because of our little ... argument." He tilted his head. "I can't help but wonder: Why weren't you?"

Peter didn't answer. He shouldered his backpack, heading for the door carefully. Quentin stepped in front of it, blocking his way. Peter stopped. "Let me pass," he said, but his throat felt tight and his hands were shaking and ... the words only came out as a whisper.

"Excuse you?" Quentin asked. "I couldn't hear you." Peter tried to side-step him but Quentin grabbed the collar of his jacket and pressed him against the wall next to the door. "You gave me *this*," Quentin said, pointing at the faded bruise around his eye. "Have you got anything to say?"

Peter hunched his shoulders and ducked his head but Quentin grabbed his chin and forced him to look at him. He was clearly furious, his green eyes narrowed.

"How about 'I'm sorry'?" Quentin snapped.

Peter's fingers clenched in the straps of his backpack to stop himself from pushing Quentin away.

Quentin smiled sharply. "I heard you actually *cried* when you heard about that girl. The one who jumped. Were you into her? Is that why she did it? 'Cause she couldn't stand to see your stupid face anymore?"

Peter froze, his hands tugging on the straps of his backpack. He could hear some of the fibers rip under the strength of his grip. "Don't," he said.

"Don't what?" Quentin asked.

Peter forced himself to look Quentin in the eyes. "Talk about her."

Quentin scoffed. "You really have a way with the girls, don't you? You leave one crying and the other would rather jump off a bridge than--"

The fist to his face caught Quentin completely off guard, but he was more surprised than in pain. Peter had tried to hold back and it had resulted in a punch so weak that Quentin barely needed a second to recover before his hand closed around Peter's collar again and he was hit. Pain exploded on the right side of his face and he let himself fall.

He had to take this, he reminded himself, clenching his fists against the tiles. He had to take this.

Quentin kicked him in the stomach, flipping Peter onto his back before he pulled him up and punched him again three times in quick succession, kneeing him in the stomach and then letting him drop. Peter coughed and curled up around his belly, winded. Quentin stepped towards him and he flinched back, felt Quentin grab his jacket and haul him up to pin him against the wall again.

"I fucking hate you." He punched Peter again, but kept him upright this time to land a second blow and shove him into one of the stalls. Peter hit his shoulder and head against the toilet bowl as he went down and he instinctively tried to roll away from the kick headed for his face, only managing half-way due to the cramped space. His shoulder throbbed viciously, his face hurt and every breath felt as if he was breathing in hot, burning air.

... the taste of ash and sand in his mouth, the heat of fire against his skin ...

He felt his control slipping, his hands shaking with suppressed anger, his muscles tensing, *something* within him screeching violently to *stand* and *defend* and *hurt* ...

"Stop!" he screamed when Quentin pulled his foot back to kick him. "Please."

There was a pause, only their heavy breathing heard. Peter curled up tighter, pressing against the wall behind him.

"Please," he repeated, pulling his legs to his chest and retreating further into the corner, his hands shaking with suppressed rage, tears of frustration and pain in his eyes and that *something* within him still urging him to *get up and fight* because he was in *danger*. He knew, somehow, that he wouldn't be able to hold back if he let go, if he *listened*. He would *fight* and he would *hurt* Quentin because he couldn't *control* himself, because he was such a **loser** ...

He had to stop this.

"I'm sorry." He felt tears run down his face as looked up at Quentin. "I'm sorry."

"You better be," Quentin spat and turned to leave but paused and turned back to Peter. "You think you're so special, with your tragic backstory and your grades and always having the right answers and your internship and getting the prettiest girl at school. But you know what? You're nothing special at all." He kicked Peter's shin. "Look at yourself, you're just a loser, that's all."

With that, he left.

Chapter 12

Chapter by [JolinarJackson](#)

Chapter Notes

I promise, this is the last chapter with so much hurt. Comfort will follow.

Chapter 12

Peter stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror at the apartment. The bruises were livid, darkening almost the entire left side of his face and circling around his left eye. He wouldn't be able to hide this from May and he would have to avoid Mr. Stark for a while. Even with his advanced healing, this wouldn't vanish overnight.

Peter shook his head at himself and drew a deep breath, wincing at the pain his ribs emitted at the movement, then he left the bathroom and switched off the light. He'd returned home to do his homework, thinking that at least this part of his promise to May, he could keep. Now, his suit was in his backpack and he'd picked Flushing as a starting point for his patrol tonight. He tried to change the start and end points of his patrol frequently, not wanting anybody to track Spider-Man back to a certain neighborhood or even street.

Peter grabbed his backpack off the floor, making sure he had his keys before he left. While he trudged down the stairs, he tapped out a quick message to May.

Going out.

May had answered by the time he got onto the train.

Be careful. LU.

He smiled weakly. *LU2.*

"How are things going with Peter?" Pepper asked from her seat on the couch, her legs folded to serve as a support for her laptop. She'd changed out of the business suit she'd been wearing upon her arrival, now only clad in a pair of old jeans and a sweater, her blonde hair falling onto her shoulders. She looked relaxed and breathtakingly beautiful in the gentle lights of the penthouse.

Tony handed her a glass of wine. "It's been okay for a while," he said, "but he started staying out past his curfew. His aunt doesn't know, but I think I might have to tell her."

Pepper nodded slowly. "Does Peter know you know?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"I told him that I'll tell May if it happens again." He dropped onto the couch and leaned his head

back, staring at the ceiling. "I mean, I *get* it. He wants to be out there, do his part. He's going through some stuff at the moment. Blames himself for the death of a girl, that kind of thing."

Pepper nodded slowly. "And that's sad but it doesn't mean he can break the rules. They are in place to protect him, that's what you told his aunt. Peter's your responsibility when he's in the suit and you need to act like it."

He rubbed his forehead. "I *know*. I just ..." He shook his head.

"He's your responsibility," Pepper repeated.

Tony's watch vibrated against his skin and he startled slightly before checking the time. "God," he sighed.

"What's wrong?" Pepper asked.

"Tattletale Protocol," Tony answered and got up. "Excuse me. I have to check on my responsibility." He went down to the workshop quickly and spoke up as soon as he was inside, "F.R.I.D.A.Y., connection to Karen."

"*Yes, boss.*"

As soon as the connection was established, Tony said, "I'm not above coming after you and dragging your butt home, kid, and I will make it as embarrassing as possible." For a moment, it was silent and Tony heard Pepper enter behind him. "Peter?"

"*Connection lost, boss,*" F.R.I.D.A.Y. informed him.

"What?" Tony straightened. "F.R.I.D.A.Y., what happened?"

"*He hung up.*"

Tony gaped at F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s nearest sensor. "He *hung up*? He hung up *on me*?"

"*The analysis of the connection returned no problems. It looks like it was interrupted voluntarily.*"

Tony slapped his palm against the workbench. "Reconnect." Pepper's hand squeezed his arm, just when the connection was established and lost again immediately. "Oh, that little ..." Tony cursed and snapped, "F.R.I.D.A.Y., override Karen's communication system. Enforce connection." As soon as the connection was established, Tony said, "Peter, I'm serious. You go home right now or I'm coming out there to get you."

There was no answer.

"F.R.I.D.A.Y.?"

"*We are connected.*"

"Are you giving me the silent treatment now?" Tony asked and then, louder, "Peter!"

He waited and when no answer was forthcoming, he said, "F.R.I.D.A.Y., my suit."

"*No!*" Peter's response caused Tony to pause, even while the Iron Man suit was still assembling around him. "*Sorry, Mr. Stark. Sorry, I didn't notice the time.*"

"Karen is supposed to remind you."

"I ..." Peter swallowed. *"I muted the reminders yesterday and I forgot to turn them on again. I swear I thought ... I thought they were turned on. And I ... kinda panicked when you called. I ... please don't tell May."*

Tony crossed his arms but he didn't answer, considering Peter's words.

"I ... can't I stay out a little longer?"

"Absolutely not."

Peter took a breath and it sounded shaky. *"I **need** to be out here. Mr. Stark, I can't do anything at home, but more stuff happens after eleven and people need Spider-Man to-"*

"No, Peter, they don't. Nobody needs Spider-Man right now." He caught his suit's helmet as it came to him, keeping it in his hand.

"But you don't understand-"

Tony slammed the helmet onto the workbench and stepped up to the sensor he was talking to. "No, *you* don't understand, Peter. I stuck my neck out for you when your aunt wanted you to give Spider-Man up and the only reason you are even still wearing that suit is because I assured May that I would keep an eye on you and I will not break that promise. So either you turn around and go home right now or I'll come over there and drag you home kicking and screaming and I'll make you a promise: If that should happen, you won't see the suit again for a long time because if there's one thing that I can't have on my team, it's people I can't rely on. I'm not your babysitter, Peter, I'm your leader and I'm giving you an *order*."

Pepper stepped to put herself between Tony and the sensor, her arms crossed and a scowl on her face. Tony turned away from her, already feeling sorry for the harsh words himself.

It was quiet but Tony could still hear Peter breathing, so he gave him a minute.

"I'm sorry."

"Been there, done that," Tony answered. "I have, like, three t-shirts now. *Go home*. And come over after school tomorrow. We need to talk."

There was silence again.

"Did you hear me, Peter?"

"Yes, sir."

Tony started to feel slightly guilty at the defeated tone in Peter's voice and softened his own. "Did you *understand* me?" He was only doing this to keep Peter safe. It was important that Peter saw that.

"Yes, sir."

"Good." He disconnected and sent the suit back to its storage space with the press of a button.

Pepper was still looking at him with disapproval. "Do you think you handled this okay?"

Tony shook his head and crossed his arms. "No."

She sighed and put her palms against his chest, her blue eyes earnest. "I know you're worried and

scared but ... he didn't sound good, Tony.”

”I'm aware.” He shook his head. ”He'll understand.” Sending Pepper a smile he didn't quite feel, he added, ”Tough love is kind of our thing.”

She seemed to consider him for a long moment and then sighed. ”I hope you're right,” she replied and tugged him into an embrace. Tony returned the hug, his eyes on the display showing him that the suit was still active. He knew that was alright. Peter would need a bit of time to reach his backpack and change back into regular clothes.

It was okay, he told himself, hugging Pepper tighter, he could make it up to him tomorrow.

Peter missed the edge of the roof he was jumping towards, his foot slipping and his chest slamming against it painfully before he fell, landing on the fire escape beneath. The impact winded him, his lungs locking up and his hand coming to rest on his chest shakily as he tried to draw in air.

When he finally could, it left him again on a sob he quickly cut off. He sat up, folding his legs and pulling the mask off to wipe at his eyes impatiently. He'd slipped because he'd been fighting tears since the conversation with Mr. Stark had ended and he hadn't been able to see properly. And he'd almost fallen several stories as a result, into the grimy alley below.

Peter couldn't even imagine what Mr. Stark would have said to that.

Rain was dripping from his hair by the time he'd calmed down a little and he shivered when a cold wind blew past. He still had a few blocks to go before he would reach his backpack. Peter breathed and wiped his eyes again, trying to stop new tears from welling up.

”If there's one thing I can't have on my team, it's people I can't rely on.”

It hurt that even after the Vulture, after everything Peter had done and tried to prove, he still couldn't measure up. He couldn't even blame Mr. Stark. Not really. He just felt ashamed at not only having been caught out late again, but also being reprimanded by the one person he needed to think of him as reliable. As an ally. Not a child who couldn't even follow the most simple of instructions.

”I'm not your babysitter.”

Peter clenched his hand around the mask.

*”I'm giving you an **order**.”*

He pulled the mask over his head. ”Okay,” he said, ”okay.”

”Welcome back, Peter,” Karen said, and he didn't know whether it was just his imagination but she sounded pitying. *”Would you like to continue your way back to your belongings?”*

”Plot the shortest route,” Peter answered. He leaped onto the railing of the fire escape and crouched there for a moment to get his bearings. He raised a hand to shoot the first web but was interrupted by somebody calling for help, the sound muffled as suddenly as it had come.

Peter looked down.

In the alley below him, three shadows were wrestling, a guy with a baseball bat and a second one with a knife were pushing their victim up against the brick wall.

"Nobody needs Spider-Man right now."

Peter hesitated. He was sure that Mr. Stark was watching him make his way back to his stuff and he'd already paused for too long. If he would take any longer, Mr. Stark would surely take the suit, but ...

"Your money. All of it," the mugger with the knife said.

"I don't have anything on me."

"Are you shitting me?" He punched his victim, sending him sprawling onto the ground.

The guy with the baseball bat kicked the downed man into the stomach for good measure, snapping, "Everybody's got money on them. Give it to us or we'll take it the hard way."

Peter jumped, letting himself fall until he'd almost reached the ground and then stopping himself with a web, landing soundlessly behind them. "I don't," he said. It was easy to slip into Spider-Man's persona. His red, tired eyes and bruised face were safely hidden behind the mask. There was no weakness visible. No chinks in his armor.

The men turned to look at him.

"Then again," Peter added, pointing at his suit, "wallet lines would ruin the look."

The man with the knife smiled cruelly. "Would you look at that? The pest of Queens."

"That's a new one," Peter said, "but it doesn't really have a nice ring to it. Could we settle on 'menace'?"

The man charged at him, stabbing the knife forwards. Peter evaded it easily and shot a web at the hand clutching it, pulling it close to pry the weapon out of the strong grip almost effortlessly before pushing the mugger away, making him stumble and fall. He threw the knife into the air and webbed it against the wall – out of reach.

The other guy seemed to take this as his cue and came for him with the bat. Peter shot out a hand, stopping the swing in the middle of execution. He kicked the mugger in the stomach and let the bat clatter to the ground, crouching to sweep the guy's legs from under him.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and ducked, narrowly missing being hit by the bat, which had been picked up by the other mugger in the meantime. He should have webbed it to the wall as well.

"I'm going to kill you, you little rat," the guy spat, swinging the bat again. Peter side-stepped him and sent an elbow to his kidney, just like Rhodey had taught him. The guy howled in pain, the bat falling.

He turned back around to the other robber and kicked him back against the bricks, using two webs to keep his hands secured. He didn't expect him to take advantage immediately, using the leverage of the webs to raise both legs to kick Peter in the stomach. Peter jumped back to avoid the impact, and that move probably saved him from being hit in the head by the other mugger, who was swinging the bat. However, the bat connected with his right shoulder instead, just above the scar. Pain immediately raced down his entire arm and took his breath away.

He stifled a scream.

The pain distracted him for just a second but it was one second too long. This time, the bat connected with his head and sent him to the ground, his vision whiting out and his ears ringing.

"Peter, I detect ..."

Karen's voice sounded muffled and then vanished entirely and Peter must have passed out for a few seconds, because when he opened his eyes again, he was pinned to the ground with one of the muggers kneeling on his stomach his fingers around Peter's throat. Peter wanted to raise his hands but he barely managed.

"... concussion ... choking ... should I initiate ..."

Peter groaned, Karen's voice sounding too loud and then too muffled to understand.

"... -tale Protocol?"

The mugger's knee dug harder into his stomach and Peter arched his back, tried to get his body to just cooperate.

"You think you're so special," the mugger panted, his grip around Peter's throat tightening ... but he sounded like Quentin in that bathroom.

... and he was pinning Peter to the floor and Peter had to take it, he had to take it, he had to take it ...

"You're just a loser, that's all."

... but he couldn't. Peter's body came back online with a jolt and he pushed Quentin off him, following him to kick him in the stomach and punch him in the face. He pinned him to the floor and punched again in rapid succession, hit after hit until Quentin wasn't moving anymore, until he heard somebody screaming at him, until ...

"Spider-Man!"

He froze. And then he wasn't in the bathroom anymore with Quentin, he was in the alley with the muggers and bloody gloves and the muggers' victim staring at him with wide, scared eyes. The face of the guy he held to the ground was a mess of blood and bruises and he wasn't moving, while his partner was trying to get free of the webs, cursing and yelling.

"Spider-Man," the victim said again.

Peter looked at him and the man visibly flinched back. Peter stared down at his hand again, at the robber. He still wasn't moving.

Was he *breathing*?

The sound of sirens cut through the silence.

"I called them," the victim said.

Peter stared at him.

"Go," the man said.

Peter felt frozen in place.

"Go!"

He startled into action just when the police car came to a halt outside the alley and climbed the wall, pulling himself onto the roof quickly. He stumbled and fell, the world spinning around him.

"Peter, you require medical assistance," Karen said. "Let me contact Mr. Stark."

"No," Peter said quickly. "No, Karen." He was shaking, shivering in the cold. He didn't feel any pain, though. Something warm was trickling down his face.

"Your injuries are too severe. You are not able to make a valid decision at the moment. Initiating Tattletale Protocol-"

Peter pressed the spider button on his chest. Karen grew silent and the suit loosened. Peter swallowed bile. "Just have to get home," he muttered. "I just have to go home." He crawled out of the suit and managed to sit up with the world only tilting a little sideways. Rain was falling onto him. Nausea crawled up his throat. His chest started to hurt, as did his shoulder, his face and his throat.

And his head.

Peter groaned and gathered up the suit, slowly getting to his feet. He was barefoot now and only wearing boxers, soaked through by the rain within seconds. He needed a moment to find his balance, but finally managed.

"Just ... have to get dressed," he said. He walked forwards, stumbling and righting himself, clutching the suit against his chest. It was cold, the night air frigid against his wet skin. It took ages to reach the alley where he left his clothes and he needed a long time to get dressed, his limbs uncoordinated, his head pounding. With the suit safely stashed in the backpack, he left the alley.

He'd only taken a thin jacket to be able to hide it in the backpack with his other clothes during patrol. It barely provided any protection against the cold and the rain. He was soaked through within minutes. He pulled the hood up and it settled – heavy and wet – against his hair, not protecting him from the droplets hitting the skin of his face like little needles. His fingers started to feel numb and his teeth chattered. The sound of the rain on the pavement seemed unbearably loud. His head was starting to kill him, the nausea getting worse with every minute.

He was tired.

Where was he?

Peter stopped and looked up. Finding himself standing in the middle of a park. He recognized the area, realizing that he was standing somewhere between the Fountain of the Planets and the Unisphere.

Flushing Meadows Corona Park.

Beyond the Unisphere, there were the dark windows of Queens Museum and, just beyond that, the rushing noise of traffic on Grand Central Parkway and then the zoo and somewhere beyond that ... home.

He'd walked right past the train station he'd intended to use. For a moment, he considered walking back but the distance was almost the same as the one to the zoo. There was a station there as well.

His head kept spinning out of control, the nausea in his stomach threatening to overwhelm him, his

throat hurt and he was wet and just *tired*. Walking even one step further suddenly seemed like an impossible task. Peter sat down where he stood, pulling his shoulders up against the rain and the cold wind.

He just needed a few minutes to recover.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Another shout-out to Shoyzz, who drew the artwork for this story. She did a great job, but the piece she made for this chapter is still my favourite!

[Go tell her what you think!](#)

Chapter 13

Tony lay wide awake, Pepper asleep and curled into his side and the penthouse quiet. There was no reason, really, for him to still be up, but he was. He'd checked on Karen before going to bed, making sure that she was deactivated, and she had been.

Everything was fine.

Tony's fingers drummed against the mattress, Pepper shifted in her sleep, muttering something that sounded like a question.

Everything was fine.

Tony was down in his workshop five minutes later.

"F.R.I.D.A.Y., track Peter's phone."

"Boss, in case you ever made this request, you asked me to remind you that it is overstepping into Peter's personal space." She paused for dramatic effect. *"And that it makes you look like a soccer mom."*

He rolled his eyes. "Thanks, now do it."

"Tracking GPS," F.R.I.D.A.Y. said. She sounded slightly smug. Sometimes Tony wondered whether he was the only one who heard the sass. *"Location: Flushing Meadows Corona Park."*

Tony's heart skipped a beat. "What?!"

"He is moving slowly towards the Unisphere. Keeping to his momentary path and speed, he will reach his home address in Forest Hills in approximately two hours."

"That little ..." Tony took a breath and tried to calm down. Concern was hitching in his chest, tightening his throat and he cleared it. "Is the suit activated?"

"No, boss."

Tony grabbed a pair of old sneakers from under one of the workbenches and slid them on hastily. "Activate Mark 48," he said and the Iron Man suit started to fold closed around him while he headed back upstairs and to the roof garden.

Wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt within the suit wasn't exactly the most comfortable choice, but Tony didn't want to wait any longer. He had a bad feeling about the whole situation. He knew that

he could just call Peter on his phone, but he wanted to make sure in person that he was alright.

The flight to the park wasn't long. He reached the Unisphere in only three minutes and landed, checking his HUD. "F.R.I.D.A.Y., location?"

"He is approaching you from East."

Tony walked around the sculpture.

He almost missed him, not just because the lights in the park were too dim to reach very far, but also because Peter wasn't walking on the footpath. He was walking on the grass, his backpack over his shoulders, a hood pulled deep into his face, hunched against the rain and the wind in a startlingly thin jacket. Tony stepped into his path, waiting, and Peter noticed him just a few moments later.

He stopped, his eyes widening as he stared at him in disbelief. "Mis'r Stark?"

Tony's stomach dropped.

Even with the shadows cut by the hood in the park's dim lights, it was easy to see the mess of bruises lining Peter's face, the entire left side mottled dark, his lip split open. There was a definite slur in his speech, explained by the cut near his hairline, watery paths of blood trailing down his face. He was wearing his jacket zipped closed, but Tony was still able to see bruises ringing his throat.



"Christ," he said. "What happened to you?"

Peter looked at him. He was swaying, his gaze seeming unfocused. Tony wasn't sure whether he'd even heard him.

"What happened?" he asked again, louder, and stepped closer. He left the suit, uttering an order to shine a torch, and turned Peter's face into the light.

"I-I think ..." Peter closed his eyes and even though Tony couldn't see whether he was actually crying, there were definitely tears in his voice. "I think I ki-killed some'dy."

Tony stared at him, feeling his own eyes widen in disbelief. "What?" he asked, shocked.

Peter sobbed and one shaky hand came up to wipe at his eyes. "I didn' mean to."

"Oh God," Tony whispered.

"I didn' ... I didn' *mean* to," Peter repeated.

Tony pulled him in, feeling how cold Peter actually was, feeling his own clothes soaking through and the icy rain against the skin of his bare arms. He was suddenly glad he'd remembered to at least put on shoes before stepping into the suit. Tugging at the soaked hood, Tony pulled it deeper into Peter's face to protect him from the sharp wind. With one hand pressed against the back of Peter's head, he kept him close to his chest as he tried to transfer as much body heat as possible. "It's okay."

Peter's arms came up around Tony's back. He buried himself closer, shivering. "It's s' c-cold."

"I know," Tony said. "I know it's cold." He could hear Peter's teeth chatter and pressed him closer, trying to fold himself around him as much as possible.

"And ... I c-can't anymore. I c-can't ... I can't anymore. Ev'rything's just ... messed up. 'm sorry." Peter took a breath. "I'm so so-sorry."

Tony let out a surprised yelp when Peter slumped in his hold and they both went down onto their knees. The wetness of the ground beneath them soaked into Tony's sweatpants immediately and he grimaced. "So glad I didn't decide to wear that Tom Ford," he muttered.

Peter groaned. "I can't stand 'nymore."

Tony sighed. "I noticed."

"I ca-can't walk. It's s' far."

"F.R.I.D.A.Y.," he said. "Send back-up, would you?"

The suit behind him replied, "*Yes, boss.*"

Tony shifted, tilting Peter's head away from his sternum and looking into his eyes, noticing that his pupils were uneven. "Yeah, there we go," he said, brushing Peter's wet hair out of his forehead before he allowed him to rest it against his shoulder. "Concussion." He rubbed his hand up and down Peter's back beneath the backpack. "I'm taking you back to the penthouse, alright? To sleep it off."

Peter shuddered and crossed his arms. "'m cold."

"I know." Tony sighed. "I know, buddy."

"And I ca-can't even crawl," Peter said, almost too low for Tony to hear. Tony wasn't sure what to say but Peter seemed to have waited for *something*, because he slumped further into Tony's hold and shook his head. Tony heard his breathing hitch and felt his chest hiccup against his own and he had rarely ever felt this inadequate.

A second suit landed beside them and opened invitingly.

"Okay," Tony said, shifting his grip. "Peter, stay with me for one more minute. Put your arms around my neck. I'm gonna put you on your feet."

Peter's hands clenched in Tony's t-shirt, holding tight onto his shoulders. Tony put his arms around Peter's waist and stood carefully, letting him lean on him. Peter's head fell against his sternum.

"Alright?"

Peter groaned.

"Don't puke," Tony said. "Please. I don't think I can deal with that right now." Tony shifted him carefully, securing him to his side with one arm around Peter's shoulders. "Right, off we go."

Peter took one look at the open suit and jerked back. Tony lost his hold on him and Peter fell. He crawled backwards on the grass, his breathing accelerated, coming in pained bursts. "No, no, no," he said. "No, please."

"Peter," Tony said, reaching for him.

Peter slapped his hand away. "No, it-it's too tight, I c-can't breathe, it'll *crush* me."

"Peter," Tony snapped, grabbing his arm and pulling him in. "It's not going to crush you!" He looked at him searchingly. "Since when are you claustrophobic?"

Peter ducked his head. "Vul-Vulture guy." His hand went to his shoulder, clenching around it. "Still hurts."

Tony nodded slowly. "Come on." He pulled Peter to his feet and caught his eyes. "You will only be in there for three minutes at the most. It's the fastest way back."

Peter still looked skeptical, his eyes flitting towards the suit, and Tony sighed.

"Trust me?" he asked.

Peter's eyes found his. "Yes," he said and the speed with which he answered, the complete conviction in his voice, almost made Tony tear up. He took Peter's backpack and gently pushed him into the waiting suit, pressing the bag against Peter's chest until he crossed his arms in front of it.

"Autopilot," he said. "You don't need to do a thing. Just close your eyes ... and breathe."

"*Is he okay?*" May asked. Tony heard several people speak in the background and then a door close, May having sought privacy.

"A little banged up," he answered, pouring himself a drink at the bar. "He'll be fine. But I'd recommend that he doesn't go to school tomorrow."

"*Okay,*" May said, apprehensive. He could practically feel that she wanted to ask further questions, know more, maybe even speak to Peter, but somebody called her name and she released an exasperated breath. "*I ... let me just inform everyone and I will be by the penthouse to pick him up as soon as possible.*"

"Nonsense," Tony answered, staring out the window towards the roof garden. He knew that May wanted to be with Peter as soon as possible, but he also knew that she needed the paycheck for the late hours. "It's the middle of the night and I just got him to go to sleep. Just ... finish whatever you're doing, go home, and I'll swing by to drop him off tomorrow."

May hesitated. "*If that's okay with you.*"

"course it is. He's no trouble."

"*If you're sure.*"

"Yes, May."

She sighed. *"Okay. Thank you, Tony."*

"No problem." They hung up. Tony released a breath and gulped his drink down before he leaned his forehead against the cold glass of the window. He still felt chilled, despite the hot shower he'd taken as soon as he'd made sure that Peter was asleep in the guest room. He hadn't changed back into pajamas, instead donning jeans and the warmest sweater he owned. It was almost five in the morning and he would have to get up soon anyway.

"There's a teenager sleeping in our guest room," Pepper said and he turned around to her. She'd slipped into her dark-blue silk bathrobe, her hair in an untidy ponytail and her eyes sleepy. "He's adorable."

"No," Tony replied, "we can't keep him."

Pepper smiled sadly. "He's also pretty injured."

Tony brushed a hand through his hair tiredly. "Concussion, bruises and a few lacerations. The shower should have taken care of the hypothermia."

"It's not that cold outside, is it?"

Tony shrugged. "It's November. However, I should have a look at how his body deals with this kind of weather. Spiders are cold-blooded. It might be a problem." He shook his head. "He'll be fine for now."

"So," Pepper said, approaching him slowly, *"he* is Spider-Man."

"You've seen pictures."

"Doesn't compare," she answered. "He looks smaller in person. Younger, too." She sighed. "Well, I've got a flight out to Chicago at eight, so I'm just gonna grab a shower and get ready."

"I'll make you breakfast," Tony offered. Pepper kissed his lips with a soft smile and left. Tony sighed deeply and walked towards the guest room, pushing open the door to look in on Peter. He'd stood guard by the bathroom door while Peter had taken a hot shower, making sure that he didn't pass out and drown. He'd managed to coax him into accepting some dry clothes out of Tony's wardrobe before Peter had basically collapsed, out like a light before Tony had even left the room.

Now, he was still asleep, but not peacefully, his face set into a frown, his breathing coming in sharp gasps and his hands clenching the pillow he was clutching to his chest. His legs were fighting the sheets weakly, having gotten tangled up.

Tony stepped closer to the bed and reached out a hand, pulling the sheets loose gently and then down a bit, so that Peter could move his legs a bit better. He calmed down almost immediately, his breathing deepening. Tony left the guest room and went to the kitchen.

While the eggs were frying, he started to check the Baby Monitor Protocol of the night. He had work to do before Peter awoke.

Chapter 14

Chapter by [JolinarJackson](#)

Chapter Notes

The last chapter will be posted tomorrow. :)

Chapter 14

Peter woke up in a bed that wasn't his, in a spacious and expensively furnished room that he didn't know, with morning light falling through half-shut blinds, wearing a MIT t-shirt and sweatpants which were too big on him. His backpack was resting on a chair in the corner, his suit out and draped over the back. He rubbed his eyes, flinching at the pain the bruises around his left still emitted. There was a hoodie folded neatly at the foot of the bed, along with a pair of jeans, boxer shorts and white socks.

"Good morning, Peter," F.R.I.D.A.Y. said.

He jumped a bit, startled, and then looked up at the ceiling. "Hey."

"Boss would like to let you know that you can use the shower and that breakfast will be waiting in the kitchen."

He looked around. "Where are my clothes?"

"In the wash," F.R.I.D.A.Y. said. "Twenty minutes to go before the drying cycle will start."

Peter suddenly realized that *morning light* was falling through the blinds and his eyes widened as he looked around for a clock. "F.R.I.D.A.Y., what time is it?"

"Twenty past nine."

"What?! I've got school today."

"No, you don't."

He turned to the door.

Mr. Stark was standing there, his arms crossed. "May called you in sick." He looked at Peter searchingly. "You look better. Shower, get dressed and come to the kitchen. We've got talking to do." With that, he turned and left.

Peter grimaced. "Am I in trouble, F.R.I.D.A.Y.?" he asked meekly.

"That seems to be a correct assessment," she answered.

"Sit down," Tony said once Peter appeared in the door to the spacious kitchen wearing the old Stark Expo hoodie and the jeans Tony had provided. Both were too big on him and he'd rolled up

the arms and legs a bit, making him look even smaller and more vulnerable than the bruises already did.

He hovered in the door awkwardly and then stepped a bit closer before continuing to hover. "Mr. Stark?"

Tony raised his eyebrows. "What are you waiting for?"

"I ..." Peter swallowed visibly, wringing his hands nervously. "Last night ... did I ... that guy ..."

Tony's eyes widened in realization when he understood what Peter was asking and he shook his head. "The guy isn't dead, kid. He's in hospital and beaten halfway to hell, but he'll make a full recovery."

Peter breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good."

"Yeah, you were lucky there. The police isn't Spider-Man's best friend right now, but at least, you're not a suspect of murder."

Peter nodded and sat down opposite Tony hesitantly, taking in what was on offer. Three places were set, but Tony and Pepper had already eaten before she'd left. Tony had been too comfortable sipping coffee and perusing the news on his tablet computer to clean up. While Peter had been in the shower, he'd made some eggs and bacon which were now sitting in front of him. The orange juice was still cold and a selection of energy bars, fruit, cereal and bagels was provided. All in all, there were more choices on the table than usual, but Tony hadn't been sure what Peter would like.

"I don't know what you usually have for breakfast," he said.

"Eggs and bacon is fine," Peter replied.

"Do you drink coffee?"

"No."

"Cause I've got coffee," Tony said.

"I don't drink coffee."

"If you're sure."

"Yeah."

It was quiet for a moment, then Tony said, "We also have tea."

"I'm fine, Mr. Stark," Peter said and a small smile flickered across his face. "Really."

He ate and Tony read.

The silence wasn't uncomfortable but kind of tense. Or maybe that was Tony's mind playing tricks on him, reminding him that the real conversation was still ahead of them. He didn't have the slightest idea how to approach it, but he knew that he had to. Peter seemed tense as well, looking at him every few bites as if he was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Tony let him finish his eggs and bacon and started to speak when Peter grabbed a bagel. "I followed up on your activities last night."

Peter ducked his head.

Tony cleared his throat. "I saw the whole thing," he said. "I have to say, it was a bit scary, seeing you so angry."

Peter pressed his fingers into the bagel, creating dents.

"What pissed Spider-Man off that much?" Peter opened his mouth to answer but Tony interrupted him, "And don't say it's because they were mugging that guy. You stopped muggings before, you didn't beat the robbers up this bad. So, who were you *really* angry at?"

Peter pulled his shoulders up and the bagel apart, creating two halves. "It's got nothing to do with Spider-Man."

"It's got *something* to do with him if it causes him to freak out like this," Tony replied.

Peter started picking the dough out of one half of the bagel, collecting it on the plate. He didn't speak.

"Don't you want to talk to me?" Tony asked. "I won't force you, but I'm here and I'm ... offering." He grimaced at his choice of words. "Doesn't matter whether it concerns Spider-Man or not, by the way."

"You're not my babysitter," Peter whispered.

"That's right. I'm your leader," Tony said. "That doesn't mean I can't be your friend." Peter looked at him, his dark eyes searching. Tony gave a smile. Peter still seemed hesitant, though, so Tony continued, "I had a friend when I was younger than you, who I would always turn to when I felt down or had problems that I needed to discuss. I couldn't go to my father, because God forbid that I ever showed anything like weakness. I couldn't go to my mother because ... well, I was causing enough trouble without adding to it with my emotional turmoils and ... I loved her very much and didn't want her to worry more than she already was." Peter kept looking at him, interested. Tony shifted, sitting more comfortably. "So," he continued, "I had this friend, my father's butler. He was considerably older, he could have been my father, really, but he always knew what to say and what to do, so I talked to him about *everything*. One day, I was sixteen, I came home and my mother told me that Jarvis had died."

Peter stared at him sadly. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago," Tony replied. "Anyway, I lost the one person I could talk to about everything, so I ... didn't anymore. The things that hurt me, that made me weak, I just ... swept them under the rug. Hiding them doesn't mean they're gone, though, and there's a point where there's no space under the rug anymore. Believe me, it's not pretty when that happens and it only leads to problems. Took me a long time to learn that." He huffed a breath. "My point being: I wish I could give you your uncle back, Peter, but I can't. May can't. Nobody can."

Peter's eyes filled with tears.

"And I'm not him," Tony said quickly. "I probably can't even compare but ... well ..." He trailed off. "You know. I'm here."

It was silent for a long time. Tony was just about to give up when Peter whispered, "It's stupid."

Tony shifted, sitting up a little straighter. "Hm," he said when Peter didn't continue and leaned forward. "I've done some pretty stupid stuff in my lifetime. I bet you can't top that." Tony could see

that Peter was thinking about talking but something was still holding him back. "It's about that bruise on your shoulder a few days ago, right? About the bruises on your face and ribs right now. The ones you already had when you put on the suit yesterday. It's about being banned from the trip to Philly."

Peter nodded hesitantly. His fingers clenched around the second half of the bagel, picking the dough out of it as well. "His name's Quentin." He didn't look at Tony.

Tony changed seats, sitting at the head of the table now, and he pulled his chair as close to Peter as he could, lowering his voice, as if discussing a secret. "Is Quentin bullying you?"

"Yes." He clenched his hand, the bagel squished. "I could hurt him back but I ... I also can't."

"You never used to defend yourself before, so you can't now."

"Yeah. I can't. I was ... yeah." He looked at Tony miserably. "Told you it's stupid."

Tony kept his eyes on Peter's, neither nodding nor shaking his head. "Why?"

"Because ... they make me feel small," he said, "like before the bite."

"They?"

"Flash. His ... his friend. He doesn't ... he's not violent but ... he says stuff and I can't ... I can't speak. My throat just closes up and I know it's so stupid that I ... I'm Spider-Man. But they make me feel like Peter Parker. And sometimes ... sometimes I hate him." He returned his gaze to the mess on his plate. "I hate Peter Parker so much."

Tony swallowed, his chest tightening in sympathy. He knew the feeling, had spent his youth hating himself so much that the persona of the overly confident playboy he'd chosen to play had felt more comfortable than the real him. "Really? Personally, I think he's a great guy."

Peter huffed a breath. "Mr. Stark, you wouldn't even know him if it weren't for Spider-Man."

"True. But that's just how things are, Peter. How connections work. I wouldn't know Peter if he wasn't Spider-Man but Spider-Man wouldn't even exist without Peter. His motivation, his intelligence, his wit – that's you. His strength, too."

Peter scoffed.

"I'm not talking physical strength," Tony said. "You know there's something heroes like Spider-Man never have to deal with: Their nightmares, their flashbacks, their phobias. People like Peter Parker on the other hand, they do. They deal with it every single day. *That's* strength."

"I get nightmares," Peter said. He wouldn't quite meet Tony's eyes but Tony didn't mind. It seemed as if he'd pushed open some kind of floodgate and Peter was being as honest and open with him as he'd never been before. "It's ... hard to sleep."

"Vulture guy?"

Peter nodded.

"Yeah, I get nightmares, too. Ultron, floating in space, caves ..." He shuddered. "It'll get better, they'll fade, but unfortunately, in our line of work, new ones come up. Being a hero isn't just kissing babies and smiling at cameras. Sometimes, you get home and you've left a city behind

which has been basically pulverized because you had to fight the big bad in its street. Sometimes, people hate you. You need a support system. People who know what you're going through. People you can rely on."

There were tears in Peter's eyes again. "When you can't run, you crawl. And when you can't crawl, you find someone to carry you."

"What?" Tony asked.

"Something Ben used to say."

Tony smiled. "He was a wise man."

Peter shrugged. "He loved *Firefly*, ..." He heaved a breath. "... which is kinda funny, 'cause the heroes are crooks and Ben ... wasn't, but ..." He shook his head. "He loved it because the crooks become the heroes. Just shows you that people can change."

"Is that why you saved his life?" Tony asked. "Vulture's?"

"I did it because it was the *right* thing to do. I did it because I *could* and not doing it ... would have been wrong. And, I mean, Liz can still talk to him, write to him, see him ..." Peter swallowed. "That's *something*."

Tony sighed deeply. "You know I was wrong," he said. "You *are* better than me already." Peter shook his head but Tony interrupted him, "Okay, so you need training and a bit of guidance but that's just peanuts." He bumped his fist against Peter's chest gently. "In here ..." He smiled. "You're ready."

Peter stared at him and then ducked his head sheepishly, shifting uncomfortably.

Tony sighed. "I know. Almost through with the mushy part, I promise."

Peter stifled a laugh and looked back up at him with a smile. His eyes were wet, though.

"So," Tony said, "from now on, when something like last night happens and you ... can't crawl anymore ... I'll carry you. I'll pick you up whenever, wherever. If it means getting you home safe."

"I don't ..." Peter swallowed. "I don't want to be an inconvenience."

"It's not an inconvenience," Tony answered. "It's selfish. My heart can't take the stress anymore." Tony put one hand on Peter's shoulder, clenching his fingers into the material of the hoodie and nudging him gently. "And if something upsets you, if something is wrong, if someone is hurting you, with or without the mask, I ... I can't force you to tell me and I can't guarantee I can help but ... I'd like to know. Just ... so I know."

Peter drew a breath and nodded again before he looked up and wiped tears off his face. "I'll try."

"That's all I'm asking for."

Then, suddenly and without a forewarning, Tony was squeezed into a hug, Peter's arms around his neck and his head against his shoulder.

"Whoa," he said softly, his arms coming to rest on Peter's shoulder blades awkwardly. "Okay." He slid one hand to the back of Peter's head and pressed him closer. "Yeah," he said. "I can do *that*, too."

May looked at Peter when she opened the door, her eyes immediately drawn to his face. She pulled him into a hug and ushered him inside, Tony following in their wake silently.

"Honey, what did they do to you?" She sat him down on the bench in the breakfast nook and crouched to look at him more closely, brushing Peter's hair out of his forehead, looking at the bruises and the cut, at the fading imprints of hands around Peter's throat. She looked sad.

Tony set the backpack containing Peter's washed and dried clothes as well as the suit down on the kitchen counter while Peter said, "It's not all from patrol."

She sighed. "Quentin?"

He nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me? Didn't we agree that we should talk about things like this? So as soon as this happened, at the latest when you got home that afternoon, you should have picked up the phone and called me and told me instead of going out on patrol."

Peter ducked his head. "I'm sorry. I was trying ... I didn't want you to ..." He swallowed. "... you always freak out when stuff like this happens and I didn't want you to do that. I didn't want you to leave work early."

"So the point you're making," May said with a frown, "is that you think I can't handle this kind of thing? Didn't we talk about exactly this kind of situation just a few days ago? Didn't you say that we're a team?"

Tony saw Peter's face fall. "No, no ... I ... I just meant, you worry and ... I didn't ..." He trailed off.

Tony saw May's eyebrows draw into a deep frown and quickly interjected, "He was just trying to help out, May. Give him a break."

May turned to glare at him. "Tony, we really don't need your input right now."

"May," he replied, "I already talked to him about this. He will work on his communication."

She stood to face him, her hands on her hips. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I will lecture my kid myself."

"He doesn't *need* a lecture right now," Tony said.

"Oh, *please*, Tony, tell me what my kid needs. Without you and your checkbook, I wouldn't be able to cope, isn't that it?"

"Okay," Tony said, stung, "wow. Didn't think that would come back to bite me in the ass."

Peter frowned. "Checkbook?"

May scoffed. "He offered to pay for your college."

Peter stared at Tony. "What? Why would you do that?"

Tony raised his hands in defense. "Okay, I feel like I'm on the chopping block here when I was just trying to be generous."

"I didn't ask for you to be generous, we're not your personal charity case," May answered angrily and turned back to Peter, "and I don't need your protection. Why does everyone think I'm unable to cope with anything?!"

Peter stared at her. "I don't," he said. "I just ... I was trying to help."

"Not telling me these things, Peter, isn't help." She sank onto the bench and put her face in her hands. Quiet permeated the kitchen for a moment. Then May brushed her hair back and shook herself, fixing her gaze on Peter. "I know ... I leaned on you after Ben's death. I know that. You have no idea how much you helped me during that time. Peter ... now you have to let *me* help *you*." She sighed. "I'm fine. You can stop protecting me."

"Never," he answered softly.

She smiled. "Okay, let me put it this way: You can start letting me protect you as well. We're a team, okay?"

Peter nodded and got up to round the table, burrowing against her in a tight hug. "I love you, May."

"Love you, too. So much." She let out a breath. "Okay, we're going to the school so you go and change into something that actually fits you, alright?"

Peter left, smiling weakly at Tony as he did. "See you later, kid," Tony said.

Once Peter was gone, May cleared her throat and fixed her gaze on Tony. "Do you agree?"

"With what?" Tony asked, taken aback.

"What I just said."

"The team thing?" Tony asked. "Yeah, that was ... that was good."

May nodded, her expression determined. "I hope so because you were included."

Tony startled. "What?"

"We have to be a team," May said, "for him. You think you can do that?"

Tony looked at her, still surprised, then he nodded slowly. "Yeah. Yeah, I can."

"Okay." She got up and, for the second time that day, Tony found himself unexpectedly in a hug.

He cleared his throat. "Right." His hands settled on her waist automatically and he quickly moved them higher, to her back, his cheeks heating a bit in embarrassment as he cleared his throat.

May didn't seem to have noticed, though, or maybe she didn't really care because she just drew back and stared at him earnestly. "That's for going after him yesterday and bringing him home."

"It was no trouble."

"Still."

Tony sighed and caught her eyes, straightening his suit jacket nervously before admitting, "I really care about him, May."

"I know. Believe me, if you didn't, I'd have you kicked out of his life permanently already."

Tony was ready to believe that.

Chapter 15

Chapter by [JolinarJackson](#)

Chapter 15

"Mrs. Parker," Principal Morita said, leaning forward in his chair and looking at her earnestly, "I understand where you're coming from but there is nothing we can do."

May stared at him in disbelief. "There's nothing you can do?" she asked angrily. She pointed at Peter. "Look at his face."

Morita sighed deeply. "There was a fight between Peter and Quentin recently--"

"Proof that Quentin might have wanted to take revenge."

"Or maybe Peter wanted to by claiming that Quentin attacked him."

"Why would he do that?" May asked.

"Listen," Morita said calmly. "I did what you asked, I talked to Quentin and his parents and he claims that the incident never happened. I mean, these bruises actually don't look like they're just one day old. You have to see my point here, Mrs. Parker. Maybe if Peter would have come forward after it happened instead of one day later--"

"You're not going to blame this on him, will you?" May's expression was thunderous.

Morita raised both hands. "I'm blaming nobody, Mrs. Parker." He looked at Peter and winced. "However, we will keep an eye on the situation, which is the same thing that I told Quentin."

May scoffed. "So this is what you understand under zero tolerance?"

"Mrs. Parker--"

"No, it's *not* okay."

"May," Peter said, putting a hand on her arm to calm her down.

"This is ridiculous, Peter."

"I'm really sorry," Morita said.

"So what?" Ned asked the next day as they were queuing for lunch. "They're not going to do *anything*?"

"No," Peter answered, grabbing a tray and handing one to Ned. He looked around furtively, couldn't help himself when his shoulders tensed upon seeing Quentin sit with Flash. Quentin didn't notice Peter but Flash did and his eyes widened slightly. Morita had been right the day before when he'd said that the bruises looked already older. Peter's healing factor was taking care of them quite successfully. However, they were still all too visible. Flash actually winced. Peter quickly turned away, getting tired of the stares his bruises were drawing. "They're going to keep an eye on the situation."

Ned shook his head in disbelief. "Seriously, did they look at your face?"

Peter sighed and rubbed his forehead as if that would help him to get rid of the headache the healing concussion still caused him. "Anybody could have done this and they'd already started to heal when we went to Morita," he said. "Plus, I didn't go to them immediately after it happened, which I should have done, apparently."

Ned grabbed a pudding and put one on Peter's tray as well. "Why didn't you?"

Peter looked at him. "I ..." He swallowed. It was hard to explain that he'd been shaking like a leaf while he'd cleaned up, his heart rate accelerated and his senses all over the place. "I couldn't."

Ned looked at him searchingly and then nodded slowly. "Sorry I wasn't there."

"It's not your fault," Peter said, smiling at the lady behind the counter as she handed him his food.

"Still," Ned replied. They turned to look for a place to sit.

Flash stared at him as they walked past and Peter averted his eyes. He saw MJ a few rows down, reading a book and eating her lunch alone. It was the first time he saw her since the party, since the hurtful words he'd directed at her. He took a deep breath and nodded towards her. "Come on."

They settled in opposite her and MJ looked up slowly, frowning as she saw them. "What?" she asked.

"What?" Peter answered, swallowing his nervousness. "Friends sit with each other. Don't they?"

MJ stared at him for a long moment, then she smiled, ducking her head as if she wanted to hide it. Peter found himself thinking that was kind of a shame. She had a pretty smile. "Yeah," she said with a shrug, schooling her face into blankness. "I guess."

On Friday, the bruises had faded entirely, the headaches had cleared and the cut the baseball bat had left behind was now just a thin scar. Strangely enough, Quentin didn't bother Peter as much after the talk to Morita. When they encountered each other in the corridors, Quentin mostly just stared at him angrily while Flash doled out an insult. But even those had become a bit more tame.

This morning, Peter had been asked by Tony to swing by the penthouse to take care of a minor tear in the suit near his ankle, so he got changed near school to get a bit of patrol in on the way. Usually, Peter avoided being seen as Spider-Man anywhere else but in Queens, but it had happened in the past that he'd ventured out to Brooklyn, Turtle Bay or the outskirts of Manhattan, mainly to practice swinging and navigating between really high buildings. Once or twice, he'd even gone as far as Hell's Kitchen, trying to get a look at their personal vigilante. He hadn't seen Daredevil yet, but he would certainly love to.

He was near Tony's penthouse when he heard it. He paused on a rooftop and looked down into the alley he had been crossing, finding one guy pinning another against the wall.

"Just take it," the victim was saying, holding out his wallet. "Take the money."

"I want the phone," the mugger said. He pointed a gun at his victim's head. "Give it to me."

Peter sprung into action immediately by swinging down into the alley and webbing the gun away from the guy. "Hey, he offered you his wallet. Why do you guys always have to have it all?"

The mugger stared at him in surprise. "Spider-Man?" he asked.

Peter widened his eyes in mock surprise and turned. "What? Where?"

When he turned around again, the mugger was already running. Peter sighed and shot out a web, sticking the guy's feet together and making him stumble to the ground. He turned to the victim, freezing when he recognized Quentin. For a moment, his stomach plummeted and his throat twisted into knots ... then he remembered that he was wearing a mask and that Quentin wasn't able to recognize him.

Quentin was looking at him in awe. "Thanks," he said.

"No problem," Peter rushed out, swallowing against his nerves. "Part of the job."

Quentin turned to walk away, which was when Peter noticed that the wallet was still on the ground. "Quentin," he said, holding it out to him.

Quentin accepted the wallet, but frowned at him. "How do you know my name?"

Peter honestly didn't have an answer, but then he realized that he could just take the most convenient road. "Peter pointed you out to me once."

"He did," Quentin said hollowly.

"Well," Peter amended, "I ... I made him do it."

Quentin huffed a laugh. "What did he tell you?"

"Everything."

"Yeah, well, must be a real shame that you just saved my life, right?"

Peter wanted to agree, initially. But then he realized that this wasn't what he meant at all. "No. It never is." He cleared his throat. "Tell you what," he said, "leave him alone and we're even."

"Really?"

"Really." With that, Peter turned and walked away, looking up at the rooftops to decide on a place to web up to.

"Is that little rat actually your boyfriend, then?" Quentin asked.

Peter froze.

"You know he's a huge loser, right?"

Peter clenched his hands to fists and smiled bitterly. He turned back to Quentin. "So just because you think he is a loser, you make his life a living hell?" he asked.

Quentin scoffed. "Come on, man. I only shove them around a bit."

"Them?" Peter asked. "It's not just him?" He smiled. "Well," he said, readying his web-shooters and pointing one right at Quentin. "I'll need those names."

When Principal Morita arrived home that afternoon, he found Quentin O'Donnell dangling in front of his door upside down, webs encasing his body, his mouth webbed shut and a note stuck to his chest.

Bully.

If you need proof, ask them.

The list was eight names long. Morita looked at Quentin in disbelief as he took in the signature.

Spider-Man

Tony laughed. "You didn't!"

"Yeah, I did," Peter answered, having changed into regular clothes while Tony took care of the suit. He jumped to sit on the workbench, swinging his legs back and forth, a wide smile on his face.

"That was brilliant," Tony said with a grin and then reigned himself in. He pointed one index finger at Peter, his expression serious. "But also irresponsible. And wrong."

Peter sighed, his shoulders slumping.

"There's a fine line between vigilantism and vendettas, kid. Don't cross it."

"I know, I know. I wouldn't have done it without the mask. Or gone after him specifically. It was pure chance. It won't happen again. I know... people might make the connection."

Tony nodded and clapped Peter on the shoulder. Peter grimaced in pain and Tony's eyes widened. "Your shoulder's still giving you trouble?"

Peter nodded and massaged it carefully. "Yeah."

"Right. Stay there, underoos." He went through a drawer and returned with a scanner. "Let's see." He pressed the scanner against Peter's shoulder and activated it. While the image was being transferred to the computer screen, Tony smiled at Peter. "I'm glad you faced that demon, though, kid."

"Wasn't really me," Peter said.

Tony shook his head. "No, that *was* you. Remember?"

The scanner beeped and he set it down, looking at the computer screen with a frown. "There," he said, pointing at something that had been marked red by the program. It looked like a splinter, embedded just underneath Peter's shoulder joint.

Peter stared at it. "What is that?"

"A piece of metal," Tony answered.

Peter's eyes widened and his hand covered his shoulder. "Oh," he said in realization.

"Oh?"

"The Vulture," Peter answered. "It must have broken off his talon when he stabbed me."

Tony winced and stared at the image. "Yeah, could be." He shook his head. "Any other residual pain from that encounter? Anything else I need to know about?"

"Full disclosure?" Peter asked. He seemed to hesitate.

Tony tilted his head and nudged him. "Come on."

"Well ... you know about the nightmares."

Tony nodded.

"And he ... we fought."

"Okay," Tony said.

"So I got a bit banged up."

Tony waited.

"He ... there was a building I confronted him in. And it kind of ... collapsed."

Tony shifted. "Did you happen to be inside of that building?"

"Yes."

"Claustrophobia," Tony said. "That's where it's coming from all of a sudden."

Peter shrugged. "I just don't like ... small spaces at the moment."

Tony sighed and turned back to the screen, making a thoughtful noise. "Let me get this to one of the doctors at the compound. If it causes you pain, we might have to remove it."

Peter rubbed his shoulder, biting his lip. His expression was hesitant ... worried. "Would that ... how much would that ..."

"Removing it would be free of charge," Tony said before Peter could finish. "It's not charity. It's the junior Avenger discount."

Peter smiled weakly. Then his eyes widened as he remembered something and he rummaged through his backpack, getting out the clothes Tony had loaned him. "They're washed. And ironed," he said. "Good as new." One of his hands brushed over the hoodie's Stark Expo logo. "I was there, you know? 2010. Ben took me. He was into science and sci-fi as well. He got me into it, really." He shrugged. "People think it must be genes from my dad or something, but I think it was Ben who influenced me the most."

"Was he a science man?"

"No, far from it. He wasn't ... he never had the grades," Peter said. "Well, he liked to say that he never had the smarts but I always thought that wasn't true."

"You miss him a lot."

Peter nodded. "May ..." He swallowed and hesitated as if unsure whether to tell Tony at all. Then he looked at him. "May really took it hard, though. There were days ... she didn't get out of bed. I thought ... sometimes, I thought, she'd die as well." There were tears in his eyes. "I tried to make her laugh or to make her eat or ... do anything, really, but it was hard sometimes."

Suddenly, Peter's protective behavior towards May made a lot more sense. "Depression is a bitch," Tony said. "I know that." He cleared his throat. "Keep the hoodie."

"What?"

"The hoodie," Tony said. "Keep it."

Peter swallowed, his hands tight around the clothes. "I ... can't just keep it."

"Why not? I'm giving it to you."

"The hoodie's a collectible," Peter said, his hand brushing over the Stark Expo emblem on the chest again. "Besides, it's too big."

"Okay, first of all, I own, like, ten of those," Tony said. "And second, you'll grow into it." He smiled. "Give it a bit of time."

Peter smiled slowly, cradling the hoodie against his chest. "Thank you." He looked like he did when Tony had shown him the new Spider-Man suit, as if he couldn't quite believe that he was allowed to even wear it.

It made Tony's chest feel tight and warm and he decided to try and give Peter things more often from now on. "Yeah, no biggie." He cleared his throat. "Now get your butt off the workbench." Peter hopped off the bench and set the pile of clothes aside while Tony spread the suit out. "*You* will fix it."

"I don't know what to do," Peter answered, leaning in to study the tear near the ankle.

Tony angled a lamp to be able to see better. "Time that you learn. Coming to me is fine for now while you're still tiny, but you can't keep that up until you're thirty."

"I'm not tiny," Peter muttered.

"Come here," Tony said and Peter crowded closer. Tony put an arm around him to allow for more room and they leaned over the suit together. "Let me show you how to do this."

END

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